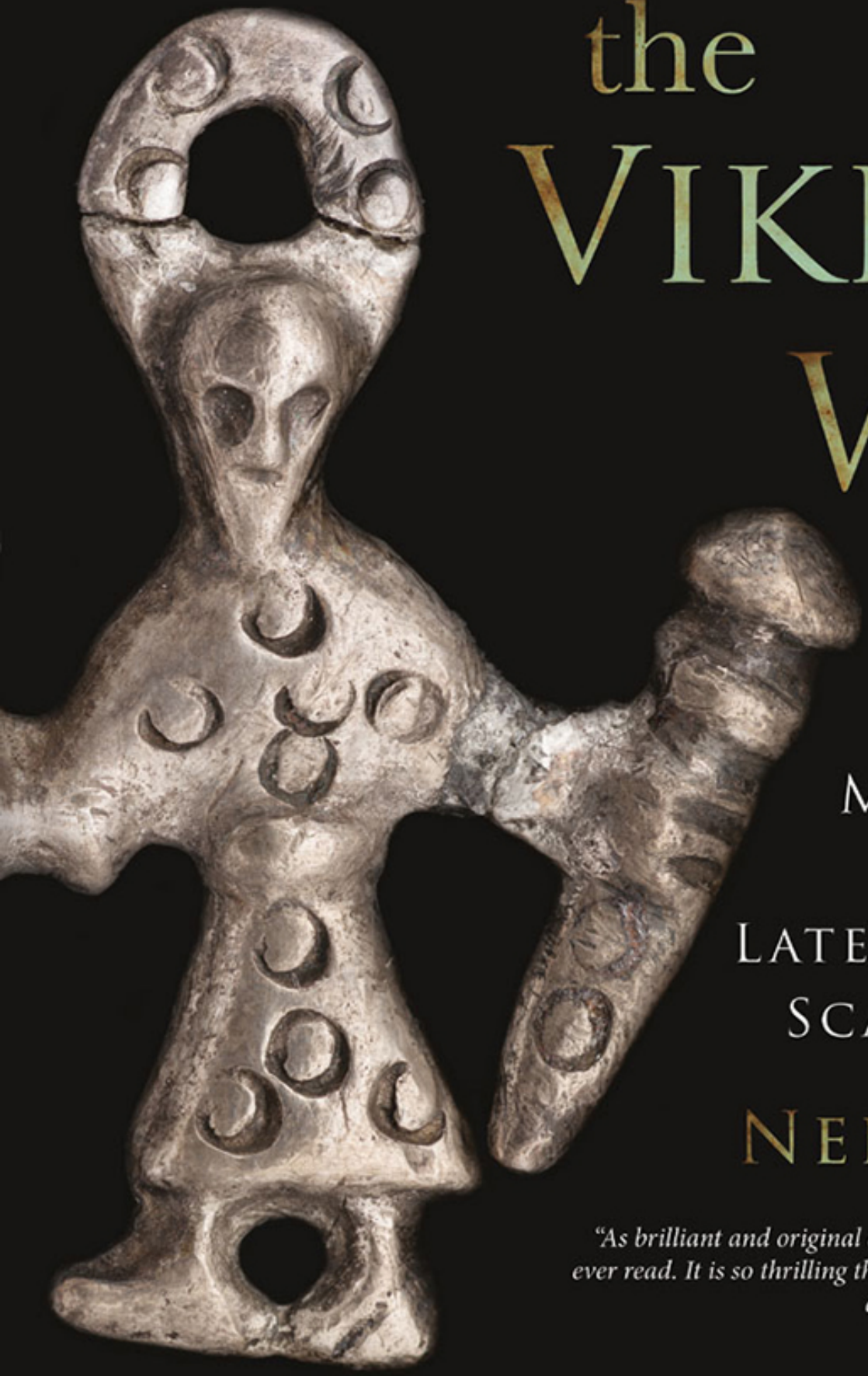
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To my children
Lucy and Miranda

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Abbreviations

BMT	Bergens Museums Tilvekst
BMÅ	Bergens Museums Årbok
CMC	Canadian Museum of Civilisation, Hull, Québec, Canada
DAUM	Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet, Umeå (see ULMA below)
Dipl. Isl.	*Diplomatarium Islandicum*
Dronke 1997	The Poetic Edda. Ed. & tr. Dronke, U. Vol. II, Mythological poems, 1997.
KLNM	Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid. 1956–78. 22 vols. Allhems förlag, Malmö.
KVHAA	Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikivitets Akademien, Stockholm
LA	Lundmark archive: private papers in the possession of Bo Lundmark
NGL	Norges gamle Love indtil 1387
NM	Nordiska museet, Stockholm
ONP	Dictionary of Old Norse Prose/Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog, online word-list available at http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk/
OPIA	Occasional Papers In Archaeology, University of Uppsala
Skjaldedigtning	Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning. Ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–15
STUAGNL	Samfund(et) til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur
Svenska Landsmål	Svenska Landsmål och Svenskt Folkliv
TVSS	Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskabs Skrifter, Trondheim
ULMA	Dialekt- och folkminnesarkivet, Uppsala (now incorporated in SOFI, Språk- och folkminnesinstitutet, Uppsala University)
ÅFNF	Årsberetning for Foreningen till Norske Fortidsminnesmerkers bevaring
ÄVgL	Äldre Västgötalagen

Dialects and dialect-groups of the Sámi language:

SaC	**Central Sámi dialect-group**
SaL	Lule Sámi dialect
SaN	North Sámi dialect
SaP	Pite Sámi dialect

SaE	**East Sámi dialect-group**
SaI	Inari Sámi dialect
SaKld	Kildin Sámi dialect
SaSk	Skolt Sámi dialect
SaTer	Ter Sámi dialect
SaS	**South Sámi dialect-group/dialect**
SaU	Ume Sámi dialect

Preface to the first edition, 2002

There have been times during the long preparation of this thesis when I have wondered if I belong in the category of what Jarl Nordbladh (1993: 202) has called, “shaman-like archaeologists … who do not mediate their experiences from site visits and the analysis of objects, who see text as a threat, as something which could be used against them”, though he was alluding to Gustaf Hallström which would be a flattering comparison indeed.

A lot has happened in my life between October 1988, when a 23-year-old graduate registered for doctoral studies at the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, and October 2002 when a 37-year-old lecturer submitted the present work for examination at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Uppsala. Not all of this is easy, or indeed appropriate, to communicate, but the events of this fourteen-year period have exercised a profound influence on the eventual form of this thesis. I hope the reader will forgive an unusually copious set of acknowledgements, and accept them as a reflection of these concerns.

It is conventional in works such as this to absolve one’s colleagues from complicity in the opinions expressed, but in this case many of those whose advice I gratefully acknowledge here will find that what I have written is in complete contradiction to what they recommended. Nevertheless, if I have succeeded in overcoming my ‘shaman-like’ problems then this is largely due to the assistance that I have received from the people mentioned below. If I have failed, the responsibility for this and any errors that remain is mine alone.

York

The foundations of this book were laid during my initial doctoral research in the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, which lasted from October 1988 to May 1992. I would like to begin with heartfelt thanks to my friend and former supervisor Steve Roskams for all his encouragement and advice, and his support during a seemingly endless succession of personal crises from 1989–91, a period when life looked very bleak indeed. For their academic guidance and hospitality I would also like to warmly thank Martin Carver, Jane Grenville, Richard Morris, Priscilla Roxburgh and especially Julian Richards. In between the sounds of academic labour, I remember the postgraduate room at York as often filled with laughter, conversation and the treacherous smell of fast food, all of which contributed to this book: my thanks to all the postgrads, too many to name but none forgotten.

Although they do not feature in the pages that follow, my doctoral studies were originally very much concerned with the excavations of Anglo-Scandinavian tenements at 16–22 Coppergate in York. In connection with this the project director, Richard Hall, jointly supervised my work until 1992. In addition to showing my gratitude for his advice, I would also like to thank him for his understanding as Northumbria moved inexorably from the inner core to the outer periphery of this thesis. The Coppergate work also involved close liason with the city's field unit, the York Archaeological Trust, where Martin Brann, Dave Brinklow, Dave Evans, Pam Graves, Kurt Hunter-Mann, Sarah Jennings, Ailsa Mainman, Jef Maytom, and Nicky Pearson were all particularly helpful. From the Environmental Archaeology Unit of the University of York, I would also like to thank Allan Hall and Harry Kenward for allowing me to read a draft of the environmental report on Coppergate in advance of its final publication.

No decent academic work is possible without one's friends, and my thesis research in York was no exception. From my four years there I have fond memories of Helen Geake, Kaye Haworth, Andy Josephs, Liz Mullineaux, Wayne Sawtell, Chris Welch, Mark Whyman, 'the second-years', the site crew of the Queen's Hotel excavation, and everyone from Hartoft Street and Poppy Road. I believe that the environment of discourse

is important, so it is only right to acknowledge that many of these memories also involve the Golden Ball, Walker's Bar, The Other Tap and Spile, the Spread Eagle, the Blue Bell, the Anglers' Arms, the Shire Horses and the White Swan.

Uppsala

Difficulties in my personal circumstances meant that my effective engagement with the thesis at York was unavoidably part-time at best. Unable to complete the doctorate there, in 1992 I emigrated to a new life in Sweden where I spent the next five years working full-time in field archaeology. During this period I naturally continued to gather source material and to publish as much as was possible alongside the steady stream of excavation reports and archive documents that formed my daily work. Ever since moving to Sweden I had enjoyed a close connection with the Department of Archaeology (now combined with Ancient History) at the University of Uppsala, and so it was with particular pleasure that I was able to formally join it as a research scholar in 1996, having grown acclimatised to Scandinavia and its archaeology. I have been working there full-time since January 1997.

Although I have chosen to set out these acknowledgements in broadly chronological order, therefore beginning with my time at York, my foremost thanks must go to my supervisor at Uppsala, Anne-Sofie Gräslund. I am grateful for her friendship, knowledge and encouragement, as well as her patience with broken deadlines and in taking on the supervision of a work originally begun in quite different circumstances. Anne-Sofie, you have my deep respect, and you are definitely *not* a positivist!

Until the last phase of my doctoral studies, the professor and head of department at Uppsala was Bo Gräslund. His advice has been important to me at several crucial moments in my research, and his unshakeable calm has kept us all on a smooth course. I thank him for all the conversations, his humane views on life and work, and for the chance to take up my studies in a new country.

At Uppsala I would also like to thank Wladyslaw Duczko, Johan Hegardt, our new professor Ola Kyhlberg, and especially Stefan Brink and

Frands Herschend for all their help and critique over the years, including detailed comments on the text. For similar discussions and much-needed intakes of international air, my thanks also go to Paul Sinclair of the department's section for African and Comparative Archaeology.

Special thanks are due to Britt-Marie Eklund, Lena Hallbäck and their colleagues in our departmental library at Uppsala, without doubt the best institutional collection I have ever worked in. I am also grateful to the staff of the main university library Carolina Rediviva, and especially to the librarians in the Special Reading Rooms for Early Manuscripts who gave me every assistance in my consultation of the circumpolar ethnographies and the Byzantine sources.

The administration of the department rests on the shoulders of Birgitta Karlsson, Britta Wallsten, Elisabet Green and Marina Weilguni, and previously Yvonne Backe-Forsberg. Without them, all our work would be impossible.

Another special mention must go to my fellow researchers in the Uppsala doctoral seminar, whose company and conversation has contributed more than they know to this thesis. Most of them are now PhDs themselves and I extend a warm thank-you to them all, but especially to Magnus Alkarp, Linn Lager, Cia Lidström Holmberg, Svante Norr, Katarina Romare, Alex Sanmark, Anneli Sundkvist, Helena Victor and Kajsa Willemark. For several years I shared an office with Michel Notelid, which was a pleasure and a privilege: there are few problems that I have been unable to put into proper perspective after coffee, cognac and a cigar with Michel. During the last year of work on the book I have shared an office with the egyptologist Sofia Häggman. Our conversations about the Western Desert and her beloved Siwa oasis have given me a calm mental space into which to retreat from the tensions of thesis work, and I have gained a new friend: thanks, Fia.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without mentioning two institutions in Uppsala which have probably seen more archaeological discussions than the university. Charlie and all at Trattoria Commedia have maintained an alternative doctoral seminar for years, which improves on the official one with great food and drink – may the tradition continue for years

to come! Round the corner at Taverna Akropolis, Nikos and his colleagues there have been a special part of my evenings for just as long, with a shared love of wine and conversation in good company. It won't be long before you see me and Kalle again.

The Viking world

This book was produced at two universities in different countries, but its completion also involved visits to places and people in several more. I have been fortunate to be able to discuss my ideas at conferences and university seminars, to visit relevant sites in the field, and to research museum collections, in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, the Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, the Russian Federation and Sweden. Rather than rehearse a long list of names and institutions, I extend my grateful thanks to all those who assisted me and participated in the discussions.

A few acknowledgements must, however, be made by name. Firstly I would like to thank James Graham-Campbell, Else Roesdahl and Colleen Batey, who have been instrumental in my participation in a number of Viking projects over the years. Their support is very much appreciated.

In general, I owe my introduction to Swedish archaeology and culture to the colleagues from my first five years of field archaeological work at Riksantikvarieämbetet UV Mitt (1992–93) and Arkeologikonsult AB (1993–96), and I would like to acknowledge my debt to them here. As part of their investment in employee training and personal development, Arkeologikonsult also funded my attendance at a number of conferences. For reasons that will become clear in chapter 1, I owe a special debt to the 1990 staff of the Birka Project, and to Björn Ambrosiani and Helen Clarke who made it possible for me to work there. Life in Sweden would not have been the same without my friends Magnus Artursson, Stefan Larsson, Björn Magnusson Staaf and Jonas Wikborg.

I would also like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their advice, assistance or a timely comment over the years of research: Anders Andrén, Jette Arneborg, Elisabeth Barfod Carlsen, Roger Blidmo, Richard Bradley, Axel Christophersen, Jennifer Deon, Charlotte Fabech, Oren Falk,

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Some of these acknowledgements are more specific. Kent Andersson of the National Museum of Antiquities in Stockholm arranged for me to examine the iron staffs from Birka, Klinta and the Norwegian examples in their collections, and in his previous life at Uppsala University provided much valuable advice; Jan Bill calculated the possible size of boat represented by the rivets in the Klinta cremation; Stephen Harrison drew my attention to the iron staff from the Kilmainham cemetery outside Dublin; Adriënne Heijnen and Bart Westgeest provided some Dutch material on staffs; Ola Kyhlberg talked me through his Birka chronologies; Annika Larsson and Margareta Nockert advised me on the reconstruction of the textiles in the Birka chamber-graves and at Vivallen; and it was from the late Gun-Britt Rudin that I first heard of the Hedeby masks. My thanks to them all.

I have been fortunate to have had close contacts with the Department of History of Religions at Uppsala, where Anders Hultgård, Olof Sundqvist and Torsten Blomkvist have been very helpful. For much-appreciated feedback on my work, my thanks also go to Catharina Raudvere and Leszek Paweł Słupecki. Concurrent with my own studies, a small group of scholars from various disciplines has also been working with different aspects of *seiðr*, sorceresses

and Iron Age 'shamanism'. Their research has made a great difference to my own, and I would therefore like to thank Stefan Andersson, François-Xavier Dillmann, Lotte Hedeager, John Lindow, Bente Magnus, Jens Peter Schjødt, Brit Solli and Clive Tolley.

I have also gained inspiration from the annual ECfunded Socrates seminars on Viking Society and Culture, held since 1998 as joint ventures between the universities of Aarhus, Kiel, Uppsala and York, and expanded from 2002 to include Nottingham, Poznan, Tartu and Trondheim. At these meetings I would especially like to acknowledge my friends Trine Buhl and Pernille Hermann, who embody all the positive sides of academic research. I also benefited from the late Iron Age postgraduate seminars organised in 1998 at the university of Oslo, and funded by them in conjunction with NorFa.

Þórhallur Þráinsson has turned my written descriptions of what I believe to be the burials of *vǫlur* into wonderful reconstruction drawings, and I would like to express my appreciation for his commitment to these illustrations. As for all Icelanders, for Þórhallur the sagas represent a living heritage and it is always a pleasure for me to discuss them in this light; he has brought several relevant episodes to my attention.

I am very grateful to Susanne Bøgh-Andersen for allowing me to use the artefact drawings from her 1999 thesis on roasting spits. This is the standard work on these objects, many of which I discuss here in the context of a proposed re-interpretation, and Susanne's generosity has saved me from having to commission a very large number of illustrations. I also thank Flemming Bau for permission to reproduce his line drawings from the Fyrkat cemetery report.

Unless otherwise noted in the text, all translations from modern Scandinavian languages are my own. I thank Mats Cullhed for checking my translations from Latin, Håkan Rydving for advice on the use of terms from the Sámi dialects, and Stefan Brink for doing his best to ensure that my Old Norse passed muster. Henrik Williams helped me with the runic inscriptions from the Klinta grave (which as it turned out were indecipherable!). In all this linguistic work I must again emphasise that any remaining errors are mine alone.

Svante Norr designed the layout of the book and set the text electronically, while at the same time providing valuable comments on its content. Karin Bengtsson and Cecilia Ljung have scanned all the illustrations, with great patience as I repeatedly came back to them with

‘just one more’ picture. A line of acknowledgements does not do justice to the amount of editorial and technical work that all this entailed, and I would like to record my debt to them here. *Thanks* to you all for a great job. I am also very grateful to Göran Engemar of Uppsala University’s editorial office for advice on printing the thesis.

Sápmi and the Sámi

The Sámi people occupy a special place in this thesis, and it is no accident that of all the years of work I remember with most pleasure the time spent on this aspect of my studies.

Among all the scholars of Sápmi’s archaeology and culture with whom I have collaborated, I owe my greatest debt to Inger Zachrisson, who since my first visit to Scandinavia has been a constant friend and guide through the Sámi world. She has my warmest thanks, and my deep respect for her quiet determination in the face of sometimes the bitterest opposition.

In 1997 I held a research scholarship in Sámi religion at Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum in Jokkmokk, and have made many visits before and since to this excellent institution just inside the arctic circle. I would like to thank Inga-Maria Mulk and her colleagues for their assistance, with a special mention for Ájtte’s librarian Birgitta Edeborg whose efficiency made my research there many times more effective. In particular, a very warm thank-you to my friend Anna Westman for sharing her copious knowledge of religion, and for giving up so much of her work and leisure time during my visits to Lappland. Equal thanks go to another friend at Ájtte, Gunilla Edbom, who has been an unfailingly cheery guide through Sápmi’s material culture and also Jokkmokk’s somewhat dubious nightlife. Isse Israelsson at Ájtte generously allowed me access to her unpublished work on Sámi bark-face carvings. My visits to Jokkmokk have been enhanced by the goodwill of those I have met there, so a friendly wave to Ann-Catrin Blind, Kerstin Eidlitz Kuoljok, John Kuhmunen, Magnus Kuhmunen, Gunnel Kuoljok, Lena Kuoljok Lind, Ingrid Metelius, and John Erling Utsi; Gertrud, please tell Gustav that ‘Armstrong’ says hello.

Much of our knowledge of Sámi traditional beliefs is preserved in the form of stories recorded by ethnographers, but this ‘anthropological’

context does little justice to a tradition that continues today and which forms a vital part of the Sámi cultural heritage. On several occasions I have been fortunate to listen to Johan Märak, Anna-Lisa Pirtsi Sandberg and Lars Pirak, whose family tales of great *noaidi* such as Unnásj, Birkit and Berhta still have much to say to a modern audience: I thank them here.

In addition to my own researches, most of what I know of Sámi religion comes from the teaching and conversation of Louise Bäckman and Håkan Rydving, the former at a number of conferences over the years and the latter during his courses at Uppsala University in 2000 and 2001; my thanks to them both. I also thank Bjørnar Olsen, who has given me both friendly encouragement, information and practical assistance on numerous occasions over the years of research, and outside the scope of the thesis in the course of our joint project on the Sámi sacred landscapes of the White Sea. Hans Mebius always has interesting ideas on Sámi religion, and I have enjoyed our conversations.

In the arctic midsummer of 1993 I was able to visit a number of museums in the Finnmarks-Vidda and Varangerfjord regions of Norwegian Sápmi, under the guidance of Audhild Schanche and Reidun Andreasson: thanks to them and to all at Guovdageainnu Gilisillju in Kautokeino, the Coastal Sámi Museum at Kokelv, Samiid Vuorka-Davvirat at Karasjok, Vadsø Museum, and particularly the Varanger Sámi Museum at Mortensnes. Years afterwards, this field-trip prompted an entire book from one of its participants (Bradley 2000: xi), from which its quality can be judged. I would also like to thank Knut Helskog for his guidance around the rock art sites along the Alta fjord over several days that same summer.

Finally, at a more general level I have been fortunate to review the excellent Sámi collections in a number of museums. In Sweden these have included the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, Gammlia (Västerbotten Museum) in Umeå, Norrbotten Museum in Luleå, and Jamtli (Jämtland County Museum) in Östersund; in Norway, Alta Museum and the Oldsaksamlingen in Oslo.

Comparative ethnographic and archaeological work

As will become clear in the following chapters, one of the key themes of this book concerns the unique location of Viking-Age Scandinavia on the frontier between the Germanic and circumpolar cultural spheres. I have therefore come to feel strongly that no serious assessment of the popular religion of this region can be undertaken without a firm grasp of the other arctic and sub-arctic belief systems, especially those of Siberia. Inevitably, it is impossible for any one scholar to gain a deep expertise of this entire area, but an overview of the field – and especially its material culture – seemed necessary to acquire. Over the years of thesis research I have therefore visited a number of foreign institutions specialising in circumpolar shamanism, and attempted a regular attendance on the conference circuit for these issues.

Despite its relevance, the data that I collected obviously cannot be presented in its entirety here – partly for practical reasons, but mainly to avoid the transformation of the thesis into an ethnographic catalogue. I therefore chose to subsume much of this work's conclusions in a separate edited volume, *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (Price 2001a), which I prepared parallel with the thesis and as a deliberate complement to it. My intention was to provide the kind of introduction to the subject that I wished had existed when I began my research. While I refer the reader to this other book, I must still emphasise that the synthetic work behind it formed an integral part of preparing the present one. Precisely because this aspect of my studies is not always directly visible in the following chapters, some brief summary of it is required here.

The survey that I undertook naturally focused on the belief systems of Siberia, and extended eastwards through Alaska, the Northwest Coast cultures of Canada, and across the arctic and sub-arctic to Greenland. This work focused around three research communities in Canada, the United States and Denmark, and the much larger network of contacts that connects them. In all cases, my viewing, handling and discussion of sacred material held at these institutions was undertaken with appropriate respect and in accordance with the guidelines of access agreed with the First Nations peoples and other indigenous communities concerned.

Firstly, in the United States I was able to examine the outstanding archaeological and ethnographic collections held at the Arctic Studies Centre in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, DC. In addition to their own Alaskan material, through a series of collaborative ventures with Russian institutions the Centre has also assembled the most comprehensive database on Siberian religion that exists outside St. Petersburg (I refer in particular to the results of the *Crossroads of Continents* project, which effectively provided the long-awaited synthetic report on the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897–1903, discussed in chapter 5; see also Fitzhugh & Crowell 1988). Beyond the circumpolar cultures proper, the museum also houses magnificent collections of related shamanic material from the Eastern Woodlands and Northern Plains. I would like to thank the director of the Centre, Bill Fitzhugh, together with Elisabeth Ward and Igor Krupnik for their advice and assistance on several visits to Washington. This research, which was undertaken while working on the Smithsonian's exhibition *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*, was funded by my remuneration from the Arctic Studies Centre. Also in the US, I was able to make valuable contact with a number of shamanic researchers at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, held in New Orleans in 2001.

Secondly, at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Hull, Québec, I was fortunate to have been able to review two aspects of the ethnographic and archaeological collections, relating to the eastern Canadian arctic (Dorset and Thule cultures) and the peoples of the Northwest Coast (in particular the Tlingit, Gitxsan, Nisga'a, Tsimshian, Haida, Nuxalk [formerly known as the Bella Coola], Kwakwaka'wakw [formerly Kwakiutl], Nuu-Chah-Nulth [formerly Nootka], and the Xwe Nal Mewx [formerly Coast Salish]). In connection with this work at the CMC I would like to thank Pat Sutherland, Leslie Tepper and Margo Reid, and Stephen Inglis for arranging access to the magazine collections. My visit to the twin cities of Ottawa and Hull was funded by Berit Wallenbergs Stiftelse.

The third focus of this comparative work was made possible by Martin Appelt and Hans Christian Gulløv of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen,

whom I warmly thank for taking me through the shamanic paraphernalia in the superb arctic collections there. My understanding of shamanism among the Netsilik, Nunivak and the Greenland cultures is largely based on this material, particularly that collected on Knud Rasmussen's expeditions. My visits to Denmark were funded by the National Museum's Greenland Research Centre (now SILA) and the Danish Polar Centre, in connection with the Copenhagen conference on arctic identity held in 1999. In the same year I also received very valuable feedback on the thesis research at the conference on circumpolar shamanism organised by the Centre for North Atlantic Studies at Aarhus University, who also funded my participation there; I thank Frode Mahnecke, Adriënne Heijnen, Ulla Odgaard and Torben Vestergaard for their assistance.

In the autumn of 2000, in conjunction with presenting the thesis research at the Viking Millennium International Symposium in eastern Canada, I was able to extend my survey to the cultures of Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia (Groswater and Dorset Palaeo-Eskimos, Maritime Archaic Indians, Innu, Inuit, Beothuk and Mi'kmaq). Here I made valuable visits to the Newfoundland Museum in St. John's, the *Full Circle* exhibit at Corner Brook, and the interpretation centre at the site of Port au Choix. Visiting L'Anse aux Meadows, where the Scandinavians probably first encountered the Native Americans, was an extraordinary experience. My participation at the symposium was funded primarily by the Swedish Institute, with additional contributions from the Government of Canada (Dept. of Tourism, Culture and Recreation), the Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Labrador Straits Historical Development Corporation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Parks Canada.

Beyond these detailed studies, I also spent much time working through the displays of shamanic material held in the ethnographic collections of Scandinavia and Great Britain. In Sweden these included the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, and the Ethnographic Museum in Göteborg; in Denmark, the National Museum in Copenhagen; in Norway, the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo; in Finland, the Museum of Cultures in Helsinki; and in the UK, the ethnographic collections of the British

Museum (formerly housed separately as the Museum of Mankind) in London.

I have always tried to ground my work on discussions with the broader community of shamanic scholarship in archaeology, beyond the circumpolar area. Foremost here has been my collaboration with the group of researchers based at the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Following the pioneering work of David Lewis-Williams on the sacred art of the San Bushmen, the RARI team and their circle in southern Africa now form one of the world's most important centres of excellence for shamanic studies, and my work has benefited greatly from their comments. Although we have met in various countries at different times, I am particularly grateful for the guidance of David and his colleagues on an extended visit to rock art sites in the Drakensberg, Waterberg and Magaliesberg of South Africa in the spring of 2000. The experience of discussing the shamanic worldview with some of its most brilliant interpreters is always invigorating under any circumstances, but the memory of these conversations in the specific context of the rock shelters, as the sun set on the Berg, or around the fire as the constellations of the southern sky appeared overhead, will remain long in my mind. In addition to David himself, I would like to very warmly thank my friend Geoff Blundell for all his advice, assistance and hospitality on numerous occasions. In South Africa I would also like to thank Sam Challis, Jamie Hampson, Ghilraen Laue, Siyakha Mguni, Sven Ouzeman, Ben Smith, Pat Vinnicombe and Carol Wallace. My first visit to South Africa was made possible by a very generous grant from Paul Sinclair and the section for African and Comparative Archaeology at my home department in Uppsala, which in the nick of time enabled me to run the session on 'Ritual and the Sacred Domain' at the fourth World Archaeological Congress held in Cape Town in 1999; Antonia Malan at UCT helped arrange my stay there. The second, extended visit in 2000 was funded from a variety of sources credited below.

A vital element of shamanism is the world beyond the shaman – the community and society within which she or he operates. One aspect of this is the relationship between people and their environment, especially the

‘ensouled world’ that is such a crucial part of circumpolar belief systems. Having encountered such perceptions at first-hand within the arctic region, I wanted to try to understand how they functioned in other shamanic traditions. In the summer of 2000, while in Australia to speak at the 11th International Saga Conference in Sydney, I therefore took the opportunity to travel to the Northern Territory to visit the landscapes around Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta, and to discuss their symbolic significance with representatives of the Anangu people who are native to the area. I would like to thank tribal elder Andrew Uluru and also Tiku Captain for sharing their ancestral stories from Tjukurpa, and the staff of the Anangu Cultural Centre for arranging these meetings.

Common to many of these comparative studies are a number of scholars specialising in shamanic belief systems, whose advice and assistance I would also like to acknowledge here. My thanks go to Chris Chippindale, Katja Devlet, Thomas Dowson, Natalia Fedorova, Knut Helskog, Sandra Hollimon, Peter Jordan, Nadezhda Lobanova, Igor Manjukhin, Martin Porr, Andrzej Rozwadowski, Aaron Watson, Howard Williams and Dave Whitley. I am also indebted to Damian Walter of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, who very generously gave me access to the bibliographic archive that he compiled during his doctoral work on Nepalese shamanism.

Previously published material

A few paragraphs in this book have previously appeared in other publications that I have produced during the period of thesis research (Price 1998b, 2000c, 2004a, 2005d [the latter pair in press when the first edition was published], and parts of my text sections from Löndahl, Price & Robins 2001). In addition, the first half of my 2001b paper on ‘An archaeology of altered states’ is reproduced piecemeal in chapter 5.

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The primary funding for the doctorate was provided in York by a Major State Studentship from the British Academy (1988–91), and in Uppsala in

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Publication of the thesis was made possible by grants from Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur and Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet i Uppsala, with the support of the Faculty of History and Philosophy at Uppsala University.

In 1994, a short period spent back in York to sort out the bureaucracy of relocating my studies to Sweden was facilitated by a grant from the Society for Medieval Archaeology's Eric Fletcher fund. The reconstruction drawings by Þórhallur Þráinsson were financed by the Hildebrand fund of Svenska Fornminnesföreningen, from which an earlier grant also paid my expenses for a trip to Germany to examine the Hedeby masks. I was able to see the masks in the State Historical Museum in Novgorod with the financial assistance of the British Council and the Russian Academy of Sciences. My attendance at a number of academic meetings was funded by the Swedish Institute, and by host institutions including the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, the Mitthögskolan in Östersund, and the universities of Tromsø and Trondheim. From 1997 to 2002 I also received eight grants from the Mårten Stenberger memorial fund, the Rydeberg fund and the Valsgärde fund of my home department at Uppsala. Other sponsors have already been mentioned above.

I would like to extend my grateful thanks to all the above-named organisations and institutions, especially the two primary sponsors, without which this thesis could never have been brought to completion.

Family and friends

I owe one of my greatest debts to a small group of people whose companionship has brightened many days. They represent a long span of

my life – the creation of this thesis – and in the way of things I have lost touch with some of them. For all these friends though, present and past, ‘thanks’ is inadequate: Aidan Allen, Charlotte Anderung Nordin, Anna Bergman, Phil Emery, Eva Hyenstrand, Mary MacLeod, Scott McCracken, Christiane Meckseper, Linda Peacock, Lawrence Pontin, Liz Popescu, Sabrina Rampersad, Lisa Rundqvist, Clas Thoresson and Kalle Thorsberg.

My wife Linda Qviström knows how very much I owe to her, beyond anything that I can express here. She would be embarrassed if I wrote what I really want to say, so my thanks will be private.

My last thanks go to my parents, who always gave me their unqualified support in the pursuit of my chosen profession as in other areas of my life, and in particular during the production of this thesis. It is to their memory that I dedicate *The Viking Way*, with love.

Neil Price
Uppsala, 2nd October 2002

Preface to the second edition

The first edition of *The Viking Way* was published in November 2002 by Uppsala University, as my PhD thesis in Archaeology at that institution (Swedish academic convention sees doctorates printed as part of the examination process). The initial print run sold out almost immediately, as did a reprint early the following year. Since then the work has been largely unavailable, other than as library copies and a number of bootleg pdfs appearing online.

This new edition, revised and extended, has come about in response to a demand that I had not expected, and still cannot quite believe. It has also taken me an inordinately long time to prepare, and I apologise to the many readers who have contacted me asking when (or, indeed, whether) the new edition was finally going to come out. The kindly editors at Oxbow Books have been patient far, far beyond any reasonable call of duty, and in mitigation for years of endlessly delayed revisions I can only say that, sometimes, life intervenes. I hope that both readers and publishers feel that the wait was worth it.

Revisions and updates

A very great deal of new work has appeared since the publication of the first edition, indeed on occasion in response to it. One of the (many) contributing factors in the long wait for this revised edition was a conscious decision to wait for other scholars to publish major works of relevance that were clearly on the way, thus enabling me to incorporate their findings here with proper acknowledgement.

My original plan was to completely revise the entire volume, essentially by rewriting it. However, it gradually became clear that the sheer quantity of new research (which also coincided with a dramatic expansion in academic Viking studies generally) would make this a near-impossible task. Moreover, I was also surprised to discover that, although they welcomed the inclusion of new material in principle, friends and colleagues were actually much keener to simply have access to the original. The resulting second edition

is therefore inevitably something of a compromise, but a deliberate and structured one.

If readers wish to use the original edition, they will find it all here, essentially unchanged and presented as before. The only alterations are minor edits to correct typos and basic errata, and also different pagination to fit a new format. In a few places, I have removed or edited short passages on method that only served a purpose in the context of a PhD thesis for examination, and also toned down some of the harsher critique. In chapter 7, the rather simplistic binary diagrams of the first edition have been replaced by prose, in my opinion a form that better fits the concluding narrative. The original Swedish summary has also been omitted in this new and different context.

The illustrations are largely unchanged, except that several are now reproduced in colour, and of course there are also some new finds that have been made since 2002; a few have been replaced due to copyright concerns. A number of new reconstructions are also included of burials discussed in the first edition, alongside the original text. Maps and tables have been fully updated.

Beyond the original content, the revisions and additions to the text come in two main forms.

First, in cases where specific matters that I discussed in the first edition – such as objects or individual burials – have since been expanded upon through new research, this has been incorporated directly. In chapters 6 and 8, a few brief passages have been incorporated from a couple of later publications (Price *et al.* 2019; Price in press). General references have also been updated throughout with the literature that has appeared since 2002.

An exception to this is the section on archaeological theory in chapter 1. Intellectual currents have moved on substantially in the last 16 years (*e.g.* Harris & Cipolla 2017), and my own ideas have changed as part of that process. However, to comprehensively incorporate new theoretical works and perspectives would not only radically change the book, but would also alter the contextual purpose of this section in sketching a background for the arguments made in that first edition. For better or worse, the book played a significant role in the debate on archaeological interactions with the text-based disciplines, and was also one of the first attempts at a pluralistic approach to Viking studies. Both these discussions continue today, and even in the somewhat uneasy form of ideas preserved in aspic from 2002, I felt this section worth retaining for those reasons. For my theoretical thinking (such as it is) since then, readers are directed to my subsequent publications, listed in the bibliography.

Second, I have chosen to address more discursive developments in the specific themes of the work – arguments, ideas and interpretations – in the form of an entirely new eighth chapter that has also provided the subtitle for the book as a whole. Broadly following the sequence of the original contents, this summarises the current material and its implications, some of them quite significant. Those wishing to follow the debates in more depth will find all the references here. It is my hope that the resulting text thus provides a properly updated look at the field (to late 2018), while also giving readers full access to the content of the first edition that has been unavailable for so long. For the first time, the whole volume is now also indexed.

In all, this second edition has been expanded by some 35,000 words and includes references to more than 500 new works published since 2002.

Acknowledgements to the second edition

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A special word of thanks too for Þórhallur Þráinsson, whose superb reconstruction drawings have taken on a life of their own in the years since the first edition. We still collaborate on new projects, and I look forward to many more.

For very different, but just as stimulating, forms of engagement, I would also like to thank Paul Mortimer, Steve Pollington, Dave Roper, Matt Bunker and everyone associated with the Wulfheodenas living history group.

I have also discussed these ideas in an academic context on lecture tours of Scandinavia, the UK, the US and farther afield, and the comments I have received on those occasions have made a major difference to this new edition. I would like to thank all those who shared their ideas with me at universities, museums and conferences in Aarhus, Aberdeen, Boston, Cambridge, Cape Town, Copenhagen, Cork, Dublin, Durham, Guangzhou, Gotland, Göteborg, Harvard, Johannesburg, Jokkmokk, Kem, Kiel, Kirkwall, Kyoto, Leicester, London, Los Angeles, Lund, Montréal, Moscow, Nottingham, Oslo, Östersund, Oxford, Petrozavodsk, Poznań, Providence, Reykjavík, San Francisco, Sapporo, Southampton, St. Andrews, St. John’s, Stanford, Stockholm, Sydney, Tórshavn, Tromsø, Trondheim, Umeå, Uppsala, Vancouver, Washington DC and York.

This revised edition has been prepared during my tenure at two institutions. At the University of Aberdeen: to Kate Britton, Keith Dobney, Lotta Hillerdal, Peter Jordan, Rick Knecht, Karen Milek, Gordon Noble, and Jeff Oliver, ‘thanks’ doesn’t cover it, and the Machar will always be there. Among the senior managers there I would also like to thank Steve Cannon, David MacDonald, Albert Rodger, and most of all, Duncan Rice. At the University of Uppsala, my colleagues at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History are too numerous to name, but none are

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I owe a special debt to my editors at Oxbow Books, Julie Gardiner and Clare Litt, for their professionalism and commitment to the book in the face of less than ideal circumstances. I would also like to thank the rest of the Oxbow team who worked on the book: Jess Scott, Declan Ingram, Mette Bundgaard, Becca Watson, Daniela Lipscombe and the typesetters and indexers. Note to prospective authors: your work is safe and sound with Oxbow.

The final catalyst for this new edition came about through a set of coincidences too complex to relate here, but for which I owe the excellent Tom Horne considerable thanks and many drinks – not least for further, unforeseeable, and wholly positive consequences. My special gratitude also goes to Tom Holland, a historian I admire who combines rigorous scholarship with the best of popular communication (besides being a fine cricketer). Not unconnectedly, I would also like to thank my agent, Patrick Walsh at PEW, for his advice and wise counsel, and Walter Donohue at Faber for his friendly engagement with the text.

My time for the main phase of revisions on this book has been funded by the Swedish Research Council, in connection with the *Viking Phenomenon* project which I currently direct for them at the University of Uppsala. I thank the Council for their generous support, and I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues on the core project team: Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, John Ljungkvist and Ben Raffield. One could not wish for better companions on a journey into the Viking mind.

In the 16 years since the first edition appeared, my wife Linda has not only continued to put up with me, but remarkably also still seems to enjoy my company (though I should not tempt fate). I cannot adequately express my gratitude for her patience with my frequent travels and the years of commuting from Sweden, first to Norway and then to Scotland, except to say that wherever I am in the world, it is with Linda that I really want to be. Her parents, Ingrid and Jörgen, have also been a massive support and have my grateful thanks.

The first edition of *The Viking Way* was dedicated to my mother and father, who had died some years before its publication. This new edition is instead for two people who were not even born then: as this goes to press, our daughters are fourteen and twelve. This book partly concerns the geography of the Viking mind, and so I offer it now to them as they each find their own unique way in the world. This is for Lucy and Miranda, with love.

Neil Price
Uppsala, 25th October 2018

A note on language

Old Norse names and terms

A constant problem in the citation of Old Norse texts is the inconsistency of orthographic conventions and normalisation. After some deliberation, I have here chosen to retain the forms used in the editions from which I have worked. Similarly in poetic citations I sometimes quote stanzas by the half-line, and sometimes by the full line with caesura, following in each case the editions in which they appear (Neckel & Kuhn's edition of the *Poetic Edda* employs the latter format, for example). I hope the reader will not mind this inconsistency, and will see it not only as an incentive to consult the texts directly, but also as an intentional reminder that the author is an archaeologist and not a philologist. My numbering of poetic verses and prose chapters follows the editions cited.

I have retained the Old Norse nominative forms for personal names, even when modern English equivalents are common. This principle has been applied in all contexts, for humans (thus Eiríkr, not Eirik, Erik, Eric, etc), gods and supernatural beings (thus Óðinn, not Odin, Oden, etc), and places (thus Valhǫll, not Valhalla, etc). The use of the nominative raises obvious problems when these names are rendered in English grammar, especially in a possessive sense. For the sake of readability and in full awareness that it is technically incorrect, instead of dropping the nominative ending I have chosen to compromise with a combination of forms (thus Óðinn's rather than Óðin's, etc).

Sámi names and terms

One of the geographical terms used with some frequency in the following pages may be unfamiliar. *Sápmi* is the name the Sámi people give to their traditional homelands, which today are spread over northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in the Russian Federation. While governments might not agree, in the Sámi spiritual consciousness this region is politically borderless.

In an English-language text it is difficult to 'accurately' render words from the nine different Sámi dialects within the three larger dialect-groups. A written language has existed in Sápmi for less than 300 years, and was produced under the influence of missionaries and outsiders (in an effort to capture the phonetics of speech, some letters were even borrowed from Czech). The process of orthographic standardisation is still ongoing.

For specific terms I have naturally employed the relevant dialects as appropriate. For the names of the Sámi gods and when a generic sense is required – as with *noaidevuohta* and *noaidi*, for which our nearest approximations are 'shamanism' and 'shaman' – I have employed the North Sámi dialect according to the present literary language. The orthography for this has been codified in the Fenno-Scandic dictionaries by Svonni (1990), Sammallahti (1993) and Jernsletten (1997). It should be noted that these differ slightly from the spellings used in the classic North Sámi dictionary (Nielsen 1932–38).

Finally, the spelling of 'Sámi' itself is not uncontroversial. The accented vowel is really only of relevance in a Sámi-language text, so the anglicised and unaccented 'Sami' is sometimes used instead. Others prefer to use 'Saami', which is phonetically correct. I have chosen to retain the single accented vowel, as this follows the translation policies adopted by the main Sámi cultural centres in Sweden and Norway.

A note on seid and its analogues

Much of this book is concerned with the complex of Viking-Age rituals collectively known as *seiðr*, associated in the written sources with a range of divinities, supernatural beings and human agents.

Though I make no mention of it in the following chapters, I do not wish to ignore the fact that for a great many people in the present-day Western world *seiðr* has subtly different connotations. Today it is perhaps best known as the name for a set of alternative spiritual practices that have evolved within the broad umbrella of the so-called New Age movement, with links to aspects of Paganism, Heathenry, Ásatrú, Vanatrú and Forn Sed (all highly complex fields in themselves). These practices involve neo-shamanic performances of varying form and emphasis, and take their ultimate inspiration from the religion of the Norse. This other 'seid' (there are various spellings) has generated a considerable body of literature, both within its own frame of reference and among anthropologists interested in modern spiritual expression.

My own reservations about neo-shamanism in general, and in the context of archaeology in particular, have been summarised elsewhere (Price 2001b: 10ff). With regard to seid, as an archaeologist I find this re-use of the past fascinating, though irrelevant for the interpretation of the ancient belief system on which it is loosely based. I have no spiritual interest in it whatsoever, but this may not be the case for some of the readers of this book. Jenny Blain, an academic who is also a seiðworker, has produced a comprehensive guide to this aspect of modern alternative religion, containing a useful bibliography for those who wish to engage

with it further (Blain 2002; see Høst 2001, Wallis 2003 and von Schnurbein 2016 for additional perspectives and references).

In the course of research for this book I have occasionally been approached by seiðworkers curious about my ideas, and have discussed my findings with them both in person and via email. I have for the most part enjoyed these conversations, and I would not like to think that my scepticism towards contemporary seid should be taken for disrespect for its practitioners. To Jenny Blain, Annette Høst, Diana Paxson, Robert Wallis and their fellow travellers I therefore say that I hope you enjoy this book, and find in it some things of interest.

1

Different Vikings? Towards a cognitive archaeology of the later Iron Age

A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love, indifference and dislike; also of his race and nation, the soil that fed him and his forebears, the stones and sands of his familiar places, long-silenced battles and struggles of conscience, of the smiles of girls and the slow utterance of old women, of accidents and the gradual action of inexorable law, of all this and something else too, a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come.

"Randolph Henry Ash, *Ragnarök* (1840)"

It mattered to Randolph Ash what a man was, though he could, without undue disturbance, have written that general pantechnicon of a sentence using other terms, phrases and rhythms and have come in the end to the same satisfactory evasive metaphor.

A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (1990: 9)

A beginning at Birka

With a political revision of the language and an added temporal focus, it feels appropriate to begin this book by echoing Antonia Byatt's fictitious Victorian poet: it matters to me what a person was in the Viking Age.

In the spring, summer and late autumn of 1990 I spent most of my evenings sitting on the rocky summit of the hillfort which forms part of the monumental complex at Birka, on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. These were my first visits to Sweden, the country which is now my home,

and I remember with great clarity the experience of looking out over the lake and its islands, the forests that stretched to the horizon and which faded slowly from dark green to almost black as the night came down. My most vivid memories are of the silence, the utter stillness and the vastness of the space – all very strange to me, born and raised in southwest London. Sitting there night after night and observing the gradual changing of the seasons which is so hard to do in England, I pondered the nature of the people who had lived there and built the town that I was then helping to excavate, and who lay buried in the hundreds of mounds surrounding the settlement. I also considered the extent to which it was possible for me to ask or answer that question, reflecting on the debates that had dominated archaeological theory in the closing years of the 1980s.

I had then just published my first book, a study of *The Vikings in Brittany* (Price 1989), and despite its favourable reception I had begun to have serious doubts as to whether I really understood the essence of that period, roughly the mid-eighth to eleventh centuries AD. As part of this, I had just begun to develop a serious focus on the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia, in which I was interested as a potential window on the mentalities and pre-occupations of the time. Considering this at Birka, I was disturbed by the fact that the ancestral stories of the North should seem so much more intelligible when looking out over those Swedish trees than they had done while sitting in my office in England. Back in 1990 I was worried that my straying towards what felt like interpretative heresies would land me in severe professional trouble, but over the years of intermittent research that eventually led to the present work I was to discover that increasing numbers of early medieval scholars were experiencing similar crises of academic faith.



Fig. 1.1 Birka meditations: the Hemlanden cemetery in winter, from a pencil drawing by Gunnar Hallström, c.*1900 (after Hallström 1997: 77).*

The incumbants of the Birka mounds were the same people from whose language we have taken a word and used it to define an age: the time of the Vikings. These figures of the popular and academic imagination are of course familiar to us, in the updated version that we have striven to create over the last few decades: not just the no-longer-horned-helmeted marauders of legend, but now also the peaceable traders, skilled poets, worldly travellers and supremely talented craftsworkers who have partly replaced them. Now too, we see ‘Viking’ women alongside ‘Viking’ men; we are open to other constructions of both sex and gender; and we are learning to be cautious about our terminology. Like many such characterisations of past peoples, as far as we know this is all broadly accurate in its essentials. Obviously, in many respects the Vikings lived lives just like our own, experiencing the fundamental needs – to eat, to sleep, to cope with menstruation, to prevent their infant children from doing

too much incidental damage to the home, and so on. On the other hand, we seem reluctant to acknowledge that aspects of these and many other facets of their lives come to us filtered through a world-view that most of us would find incomprehensibly distant, unpalatable, even terrifying.

Where in our synthetic models of the period do we find serious consideration of the torch-carrying man who walked backwards round a funeral pyre, completely naked and with his fingers covering his anus; the herd of six-legged reindeer depicted on a wall-covering; the armed women who worked a loom made from human body-parts; the elderly Sámi man who was buried in a Nordic woman's clothes; the men who could understand the howling of wolves; the women with raised swords who paced beneath trees of hanging bodies; the men who had sex with a slave-girl, and then strangled her, as a formal sign of respect for her dead master; the woman buried with silver toe-rings and a bag full of narcotics?

Four of those examples come from archaeological finds, four from textual sources; they are far from unique. These and many similar instances of 'different' – though by no means unapproachable – Viking lives have been allowed to remain substantially unwritten in our archaeological histories, and our view of the early medieval North is much the poorer for that. Linking most of them are two strands of social expression which are the subject of this book, namely religion and war. In the Viking Age, neither of those terms can really be said to equate with the modern, Western understanding of them.

'Religion' to us conjures up something orthodox, a creed, with more-or-less rigid rules of behaviour that usually embody concepts of obedience and worship. These tenets are often set out in holy books, with holy men and women to interpret them, with all that that implies in terms of social differentiation and power relationships. To a greater or lesser degree, all the world faiths of our time fall into this category. In Scandinavia before the coming of Christianity, however, no-one would have understood this concept. For the late Iron Age it is instead more appropriate to speak of a 'belief system', a way of looking at the world. What we would now isolate as religion was then simply another dimension of daily life, inextricably bound up with every other aspect of existence. The people we call the

Vikings belonged to a culture “that had, among other things, a looser sense than Islam or Christianity of the boundaries between our world and the next, as well as those between the world of humans and the world of beasts” (Hochschild 1998: 74). The Conversion in Scandinavia was a clash of perceptions as much as ideologies (Carver 2003; Sanmark 2004; Winroth 2012).

‘War’ is another problematic concept, if we are to use it in an attempt to recover an ancient viewpoint. To us, warfare may be complex in the logistical detail of its prosecution, with increasingly sophisticated tactical and strategic elements, not to mention its ideological support structure in the form of propaganda and media control; it is nonetheless essentially straightforward in its brutal mechanisms and purpose. It implies a kind of system, chaotic and yet conforming to a pattern in the sense that modern war involves always a suspension of normality and the so-called rule of law. No matter how savage or endemic the fighting, there is always a certain formality in the transition from a fragile peace to the commencement of hostilities. In the Viking Age, again no such division existed, in that warfare had long been embedded in the general arena of social behaviour. We should not see this just in the overly-familiar sense of a male-dominated ‘warrior culture’, but in a far deeper way, seeping into the daily fabric of existence in a fashion that implicated every member of the community, regardless of sex or gender. Indeed, as we shall see the latter may have been partly constructed around a very explicit relationship to applied violence and its ramifications. Ritual and the supernatural world – ‘religion’, in a sense – was as important to the business of fighting as the sharpening of swords.

It is here that this book is located, in the border zone between our contemporary concepts and an equally contemporary idea of an ancient reality (for the way in which we experience the past is naturally a construction of the present). We shall be looking at the point where ‘religion’ and ‘war’ met and blended into a perception that I believe lay at the very heart of Viking-Age people’s understanding of their world. This notion of ambiguity, of a fluidity of boundaries, also permeates my third main theme, namely the relationship between the Nordic population and

their neighbours in the Scandinavian peninsula, the Sámi (once known, though not to themselves, as the Lapps). The early Norse concepts of religion and war will be examined not only in the context of Germanic culture, but also in terms of their relationship to the circumpolar arctic and sub-arctic peoples.

The following chapters will address all these themes, focusing primarily on the nature of the rituals in which they were combined. Through the medium of the archaeological and literary sources we will be exploring the social tensions between notions of religious belief, popular superstition and magic. In particular, the idea of the supernatural empowerment of aggression will be explored in several contexts – amongst and between the Scandinavians and Sámi, women and men, fighters and non-combatants, across social and political strata, and in relation to the wider world of mythological beings, including the gods and their various supernatural agents. Central to all this will be a discussion of what has sometimes been called shamanism, and the notion that in some form this may have occupied a significant place in the mental landscape of pre-Christian Scandinavia. In this light we shall be looking too at cultural attitudes to animals in the Viking Age, how the 'natural world' may have been understood by early medieval Scandinavians, and by extension what it may have meant to them to be human beings. Constructions of gender and sexuality form an integral part of such negotiations, and will be considered in detail.

Ultimately, this book argues for the existence of a particular concept of social power in early medieval Scandinavia – almost a cast of mind – intricate in its mechanisms, perceived as supernaturally-based, and gender-specific in its manifestation. It will be suggested that violence, both latent and applied, played a crucial role in this construct, articulated by means of a ritual 'motor' for the physical prosecution of warfare. Although highly variable both regionally and over time, it is argued that this aspect of social relations nevertheless formed one of the defining elements in the world-view of the Scandinavians during the later Iron Age. It may also be seen as one of the key factors that decided the form taken by the Conversion process in the North.

To employ an over-used but nevertheless relevant term to which we shall return below, this book is therefore my attempt to write an explicitly cognitive archaeology of the Vikings, an attempt which in some ways began with those evenings at Birka and my first feelings of unease about the adequacy of our previous enquiries into the Viking mind. This first chapter will take up that theme, exploring the intellectual background for the study of the Viking Age and the relationship between our sub-discipline and the broader pattern of developing archaeological thought in the profession as a whole. The role of texts (in every sense) and the tensions between the artificial constructions of 'prehistoric' and 'medieval' archaeology are fundamental to this discussion, so we can begin by looking at the steps taken towards a more self-consciously historical approach to material culture studies in Scandinavia.

Textual archaeology and the Iron Age

Archaeological research connected to periods for which written sources survive once tended to lie closer to historiography in its fundamental frame of reference. Until the mid-1980s, this remained largely outside the discussions within mainstream archaeology concerning the development of methodologies, theories and practice. The very concept, or relevance, of conducting archaeological research into such well-documented periods was similarly challenged by several historians as an expensive way of establishing what was already known. This debate is now itself largely a thing of the past, as theoretical developments have led to a general understanding of history and archaeology (and many other related disciplines) as complementary discourses, each subject to the various processes that have filtered the passage of information from the past to the present, from its creation to our perception of its existence, form and meaning (cf. Bintliff & Gaffney 1986).

In a global perspective, these research frameworks have combined in the emergence of 'historical archaeology' as a branch of the discipline in its own right. This term can be understood in three ways, not all of which are mutually compatible:

- the archaeology of the post-medieval period (British usage)
- the archaeology of colonialism and the imperial aftermath (New World usage)
- the archaeology of literate or proto-historic societies.

In the case of colonial and post-Reformation archaeology, as to some extent with Viking studies, some critics have seen it as inappropriate for archaeologists to work with written sources at all, even though the archaeologists argue that these are necessary for exploring the material culture of an historical age. Because of this, while the subject specifics of the first two categories do not concern us here, their newly-won theoretical underpinnings are of relevance. From gradual beginnings in the late 1970s (*e.g.* South 1977; Schuyler 1978) the interdependent study of historical and archaeological data sources has now grown to the point of playing a major role in the ongoing debate on these periods (*e.g.* Falk 1991; Orser & Fagan 1995; Orser 1996; Funari *et al* 1998; Hicks & Beaudry 2006; I have here cited only general studies). Mindful of the kind of approaches that have evolved over the last three decades in the United States, parts of Africa, Australia and New Zealand, I will argue below that a similar kind of transformation has taken place in the archaeological study of the later Scandinavian Iron Age.

Before moving on to this, however, we must also consider another aspect of textual studies in archaeology. With the growing impact of post-modernist ideas, imported into archaeology in the early 1980s as postprocessualism, came an increased focus on the textual metaphor of material culture. This was pioneered by one of the architects of postprocessualism, Ian Hodder, who argued that "archaeology should recapture its traditional links with history" (2003: 125). Alongside his early experiments in archaeological historiography (*e.g.* 1987), reviewed below, Hodder developed the now-familiar image of *all* material records of the past as a kind of text. In this way, both material objects and written sources are equally regarded as products of the human imagination, that can be approached with the same understandings of contextualised agency. While Hodder certainly admitted to the need for specialist skills in appropriate

areas, he nevertheless suggested that both artefacts and texts can be deciphered using the same principles of metaphor, an approach that he characterised as *reading the past* (also the title of his 1986 manifesto for the post-processual revolution, with a third edition written with Scott Hudson in 2003; see especially their chapter seven).

Hodder's ideas have had a major impact on the archaeology of truly prehistoric societies, and have been developed further by others (for example, Olsen 1997, especially pp. 280–96). However, their reception within 'historical archaeology' has been more uneasy – indeed, until the last two decades there has been very little consciously post-processual work with written records of any kind.

One exception to this was a short debate in the journal *Medeltidsarkeologisk tidskrift (META)*, beginning with a theme issue on textual problems in archaeology (*META* 92:4, 1992), focusing on the latent or manifest nature of data derived from written sources and material culture. Over the following two numbers Anders Andrén (1993b) and Axel Christophersen (1993) somewhat acrimoniously debated this, and in 1997 Andrén produced a book-length meditation on the archaeology of literate societies. In the latter he sets out a methodology based around notions of correspondence, association and contrast, and argues in a similar way to Hodder that these levels of analysis may be applied equally to artefacts and texts. Unlike Hodder, however, he takes active steps to apply this to 'real' written sources:

> On an abstract level, this interplay of similarity and difference is not specific to the historical archaeologies; it is found in all archaeology, as in all meaning-producing work, for instance, in various forms of artistic expression. … In the prehistoric archaeologies, classification, correlation, association, and contrast play at least as important a role as in the historical archaeologies. It is just identification that is unique to the historical archaeologies, and – paradoxically – it is scarcely this context that may be expected to lead to a renewal. … The unique thing about the historical archaeologies, then, is not the types of context but rather the character of their structure. It is this very dialogue between artefact and text that is unique in relation to prehistoric archaeology as well as history.
>
> Andrén 1997: 181f,
> in translation after the American edition from 1998

This was expressed again by John Moreland in his study of *Archaeology and text* (2001). He first surveyed the paths that attitudes to the Word have taken in archaeology, from 'culture-history' through the New Archaeology, to structuralism and orthodox Marxism, and the allegedly atheoretical 'common sense' approach. Following in the spirit of Hodder's contextualised archaeology, Moreland then chooses to see written sources as 'significant possessions' of past peoples, as material creations similar to any other 'artefact' that we study (*ibid*: 77–97, and Moreland 1998):

> Archaeologists must recognise that people in the historical past wove or constructed their identities, not just from the objects they created, possessed and lived within, but through texts as well. As products of human creativity, they too were created and distributed within social relationships, and were crucial weapons in attempts to reproduce or transform them. As such, the 'silent majority' [*i.e.* the 'people without history' with whom archaeologists are often said to engage], although illiterate, were deeply entangled in the webs created by writing. Equally, however, historians must recognise that their exclusive focus on the written sources provides them with access to only one thread in the fabric of human identity – hardly a reliable basis for the reconstruction of the whole.
>
> Moreland 2001: 83f

These points seem obvious, but they provide a solid justification not just for believing that "archaeology should not be given a more narrow distinction that what is provided by the etymology of the word itself: 'knowledge of the ancient'" (Norr 1998: v), but that archaeologists actually *ought* to concern themselves with written sources (see also Andrén 2002).

For the Viking Age, the question is to what degree it was actually 'historical' in the sense that Moreland and Andrén mean.

The Vikings in (pre)history

In this context we must observe firstly that the Viking-Age Scandinavians themselves were on the cusp of such a distinction – undoubtedly literate in the use of runic scripts, though to an uncertain extent, but with a bookless culture that did not employ written documentation and historical record-keeping. A crucial point here must be the realisation that the early medieval Scandinavians certainly knew about these things, and that they either rejected them outright or chose to replace them with something else.

Perhaps they did not serve their needs, or they did not fit into their view of how things should be.

From a research perspective, however, the situation is not as simple as this.

In Britain, the Viking Age still forms the latter part of the early medieval period, the broad span of time usually taken to begin with the nominal end of Roman occupation around the beginning of the fifth century and encompassing the Germanic immigrations, the slow growth of royal power and its consolidation in petty kingdoms, the destructive Viking wars, and finally the creation of the unified England which faced the Norwegian and Norman invasions of 1066 (Williams 2017). The increasing impact and presence of Scandinavians runs like an interlace pattern through the English experience from at least the eighth century and probably much earlier, and does not truly end until well into the medieval period proper, if even then. With only brief chronological gaps in the sources, it was a solidly historical age.

In the Scandinavian countries however, the Vikings occupy the final phase of the Iron Age, conceptualised and taught as the last prehistoric period. Beyond the evidence of the runestones and runic inscriptions (which should by no means be discounted – see Page 1993 and 1995: ch. 1) lies only an obscure world of stories, tantalising hints of which have come down to us in the poetry and epic narratives of the later Viking Age and after. As an indication of all the tales and histories that were once common currency and are now utterly lost, we need look no further than the ninth-century runestone from Rök (Ög 136; Fig. 1.2) which relates whole lists of them in a manner which partly assumes prior knowledge and partly looks beyond it to a deeper level of secret lore, locked securely in the minds of a select few:

> I tell the ancient tale which the two war-booties were, twelve times taken as war-booty, both together from man to man.
>
> This I tell the thirteenth which twenty kings sat on Sjælland for four winters, with four names, born to four brothers: five Valkes, sons of Rådulv, five Reiduls, sons of Rugulv, five Haisls, sons of Hord, five Gunnmunds, sons of Bjǫrn.
>
> I tell an ancient tale to which young warrior a kinsman is born. Vilin it is. He could crush a giant. Vilin it is.

Translation after Peter Foote’s rendition of S. B. F. Jansson 1987: 32ff which also provides a normalised Old Norse text, and on p. 179 references for further discussion of the runes



Fig. 1.2 The runestone from Rök (Ög 136), Östergötland, Sweden (photo Bengt Åradsson, Creative Commons).

The lines quoted above are only a few of those in the complete Rök text, and its interpretation is highly problematic (*e.g.* Lönnroth 1977; Harris 2006; Andrén *et al.* 2006: 11–14; Holmberg 2016). The translation given here is only one of several that have been made, but the gist of the references is clear. In all, the stone alludes to at least eight such narratives and probably more, recorded in both prose and verse, set out in a mixture of standard runes and cipher crosses. Apart from the fact that the detail of the stories is deliberately omitted, none of them seem straightforward, and like the twenty kings above they almost certainly contain other levels of meaning which we do not understand. The same idea of hidden powers is a common theme in the Eddic poems, with their lists of spells and charms, of knowledge dearly bought and only sparingly communicated.

An interesting problem, rarely raised, concerns the application of source-criticism to the concept of oral history, the traditional narratives from which the saga legacy ultimately derives. Put simply, did Viking-Age people *believe* their (hi)stories? How much trust did they place in their veracity, and how important was this to them? We should also consider this question as one coming from a contemporary Western perspective, and perhaps requiring adjustment in the context of a distinctly oral society (cf. Ong 1982). We know that the Vikings employed such media as skaldic verse in the context of elaborately formalised verbal contests of dexterity, wit and power; we have little reason to suppose that mythological narratives necessarily functioned differently, or that they were thought to be distinct from other forms of stories. At the same time, it is unwise to draw too sharp a line, and instead to retain a more nuanced interrogation of our categories (cf. Insoll 2007: chs 3 & 4).

All of this is present in the most elaborate sources for Viking-Age Scandinavia, but filtered through a different faith and centuries of social change. Together these make up the corpus of Icelandic texts that has dominated western European perceptions of the period for more than 200 years: the *Eddas* and the sagas. All of these are, in a sense, joint products of

the medieval imagination and its memory of an earlier reality. To ‘date’ these is far from straightforward. Many of the sagas are highly organic texts, perhaps with a single ‘author’ but building on earlier material, sometimes written, sometimes collected as oral tradition, each aspect of which must in turn be subject to individual scrutiny. The texts thus contain a spectrum of information from different times, collected and probably modified when the saga was formally composed, and then altering again through the further transmission of the work in different versions and the chance process by which certain manuscripts have survived while others have been lost. Beyond this, we then have to consider the social context and motivation behind their creation. We shall return to these problems in the following chapter (see Jónas Kristjánsson 1988 for an excellent overview of these questions).

In reviewing Viking studies today, we perceive a field of scholarship in which the Scandinavians of the eighth to eleventh centuries are seen as both the last flourish of a prehistoric Iron Age and simultaneously as leading players on the historical stage of early medieval, literate Europe. In line with this, the reader will notice that I have employed the terms ‘late Iron Age’ and ‘early medieval period’ interchangeably, and this has been done to stress my combination of Anglo-Scandinavian perspectives on the Nordic past from the Migration Period to the end of the Viking Age.

However, this is more than a mere question of semantics, since even the very span of the period is being constantly revised as the origins of what we choose to call the Viking Age are pushed further back into the early eighth century. This is a broad argument, and one which has continued for nearly three decades now in Viking studies. At first it concerned a series of new datings from emporia such as Ribe and Birka, which seemed to confirm that certain jewellery forms previously held to be typical for the Viking Age (*c.*790–1070) were actually in use much earlier, in some cases by the beginning of the eighth century. From this material and the results of research projects on elite centres at sites such as Borre, a new vision of the Viking Age was extrapolated. Taking account of the revised datings, it was argued that the socio-political and technological factors traditionally used to

define the period were already in operation by the mid-eighth century at the latest (*e.g.* Myhre 1993, 1998; Thunmark-Nylén 1995; Skre 2001: 1ff).

This approach was put forward partly in its own right, and partly in opposition to the 'kings and battles' perspectives that would locate the origins of an age in a single event, usually the 793 raid on Lindisfarne or another at Portland that may have taken place as early as 789 according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for that year. Reductionist terminology can certainly be a problem, but so long as dogmatism is avoided it is something of a necessary evil. We should remember, of course, that all the artificial divisions by which scholars analyse the historical continuum – whether these should be 'the Bronze Age', 'the Vendel period' or 'the Age of Steam' – were created as a means of defining significant social trends with the benefit of hindsight.

The 'early' version of the Viking Age was underpinned by a large amount of research on the regional polities that would eventually coalesce to become the Scandinavian nation states. Some of this work is taken up below, but here we can just note the last publication of the late Bjørn Myhre (2015), which finally confirmed the general recognition of his ideas first proposed so controversially decades earlier. In current Viking research, there is now an acceptance of a mid-eighth-century arena for the broad origins of what we might call, not unproblematically, the Viking phenomenon (*e.g.* Barrett 2008, 2010; Abrams 2012; Ashby 2015).

However, like the perspectives it opposes, the adjusted paradigm also falls prey to some polarised definitions. A period cannot be defined by a style of brooch, which is ultimately what lies behind the notion that pushing back the dating of specific objects should mean that the Viking Age 'started earlier than we thought'. At the one extreme, we are presented with an historical period defined by an event deemed important by modern scholars solely because it happened to be recorded at all (there is no doubt whatever that Scandinavian maritime raiders had been active around the coasts of north-western Europe for many years, and perhaps even centuries, prior to the 790s). At the other extreme, the revised dating of objects that are common during the bulk of what is acknowledged as the Viking Age is somehow taken to mean that social or ideological change kept exact pace

with precise forms of material culture. Myhre's work and those of his critics meets in the middle of this divide, avoiding the extremes and trying to negotiate the changing social structures of a crucial half-century either side of 750.

Similar discussions are taking place at the other end of the Viking period, with some scholars arguing that it actually extends as late as the twelfth or even thirteenth centuries. As for the start of the Viking Age, this debate contrasts historical events with artefactual chronologies, trying to match the two in an assessment of what kind of socio-political changes were actually taking place at this time. The traditional close of the period has come with the destruction of the Norwegian army at Stamford Bridge in 1066, or more loosely with the adoption of Christianity as an official religion linked to the creation of unified nation states. In artefactual terms, we must consider the erection of central Swedish runestones into at least the 1130s (Gräslund 1991), and the continuation of 'Viking-Age' object forms into the 1200s in Gotlandic funerary material (Thunmark-Nylén 1991, with an adjusted view in 1995: 611ff). As with the beginning of the period, the notion of the 'archaeological Viking Age' has been partially divorced from an overview of historical process.

Elsewhere, other scholars with a non-Scandinavian background are suggesting that the colonial character of the period necessitates a flexible definition of the Viking Age that operates differently in different areas and circumstances. This issue has been worked through at length for the Northern Isles and Scotland (Barrett *et al.* 2000, exemplified for the deep study of the Quoygrew site, Barrett 2012), but other obvious examples would include the Anglo-Scandinavian culture of northern England, the distinctive Hiberno-Norse settlements of Ireland, and the development of a Norman identity in France. A similar debate has long been in progress in Russia and Eastern Europe, and over the last decade has emerged from the state ideology of the 'Slavic question' to a more generalised level of discussion.

These ethnic concepts should also be qualified by the realisation that difference and similarity form the very textures of complexity, and can be fruitfully explored as such. If one avoids easy binaries (because even the

notion of hybridity assumes that there were originally ‘pure’ cultures that did not, in fact, exist), then the layering of multi-cultural societies can be revealed and compared (Price 2018). Needless to say, all this is also deeply infused not only with the politics of the present, but also with Viking studies’ long heritage of dubious associations and appropriation, as discussed further in chapter 2 below (*contra* Jensen 2010: 23f).

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the debates on the chronological span of a notional time period, is that if we could somehow talk to a tenth-century Scandinavian, they would probably be astonished to learn that later generations would characterise her or his lifetime as falling in an ‘Age of Vikings’ at all (here and below, see Price & Raffield 2019: ch. 1). The scholarly use of this term to refer to the Scandinavian population in general is hard to escape, but has been rightly criticised for drawing attention away from all those who never went anywhere and did no harm to anyone. One historian has suggested that we might best refer to this time as “the golden age of the pig-farmer” (Christiansen 2002: 6).

This links to another problem, namely the notorious difficulty in determining what the word ‘Viking’ – *víkingr* in Old Norse – actually means, and how it should be used. To summarise the leading contenders for a definitive reading, it might refer to maritime robbers who lurked in bays (*vík*) of the sea; in its original sense, to raiders from the Víken region of Norway; or even to those whose main targets were the fledgling market centres (*wic*) of northern Europe. We know the term did not only apply to people from Scandinavia, and it was also in use among other cultures around the North Sea and Baltic littoral. There is general agreement that something close to ‘pirate’ is about right, and that it refers to an activity or a sense of purpose. It was clearly a mutable identity that one could take on or discard, either permanently or as a temporary measure.

To complicate matters further, Scandinavian researchers tend to use ‘Viking’ in this specific sense, while those from the English-speaking world often employ the same term far more liberally. In the memorable words of the late Cambridge scholar Ray Page (1985), the Viking label has at times been applied to almost anything that has “a nodding acquaintance with Scandinavia and deal[s] with events that took place ‘in those days’”. Some

modern scholars write of vikings in lower case, using the term in a generalising sense, while others retain the distinguishing title case of Vikings though claiming to denote much the same thing. There is no consensus. In this book, it is hoped that the meaning of all such terminology will be clear from its context.

Against this background, we can try to isolate the key issues involved, and it can be quickly recognised that the central element has been above all a problem of perspective, and through this perhaps the greatest challenge to Viking studies for many decades. In simple terms, it seems that we are no longer sure quite what the Viking Age means, nor how it should be defined in either chronological, ideological or processual terms. If we cannot be certain when or why it begins and ends, then the reasons for its very conceptualisation are being called into question. Given this confusion over the (pre)history of the Vikings, and the far-reaching implications of this problem, how have archaeologists reacted to the use of written sources in reconstructing the period?

The materiality of text

Until sixty years ago, the dominant response was that of the classic 'culture-history' approach, which has long antecedents in Viking studies. As Svante Norr has discussed (1998: 11f), Swedish archaeologists in particular have long employed written sources in studying the late Iron Age. For example, in their numerous studies of the Vendel and Viking periods in north Uppland, focusing on the mounds at Gamla Uppsala, both Sune Lindqvist and Birger Nerman made extensive use of them, and indeed published their own philological studies.

This kind of confidence was shaken by the political appropriation of Viking studies during the Second World War, and afterwards dealt a mortal blow by the growth of the source-critical school. Despite this, however, to some extent all Viking archaeologists continued to routinely make use of texts, often in small ways that were not always acknowledged: the moment that a small T-shaped object became a 'Þórr's-hammer amulet', then written sources were being employed. In one sense this is a necessity. Viking studies is a unique discipline in which everyone involved needs at least a passing familiarity with the fields adjoining their own. In the case of Viking

archaeologists, we need a working knowledge of Old Norse, and certainly the modern Scandinavian languages; we need to know about the history, literature, runic scripts, art and religion of the time.

Writing history in the early Iron Age

One approach has been to use archaeology in unexpected ways, not just to complement written sources, but almost to create them. This trend is particularly apparent in early Iron Age research, and in relation to military ideology – directly relevant to the Viking-Age societies which would ultimately develop from these earlier structures. This work has focused on the origins of the material in the great Danish weapon sacrifices, analysing the composition of the armed forces that they represent, and tracing how it came to be deposited in the bogs.

In the first and second centuries AD, the finds indicate patterns of raiders moving into Denmark from the German marches, resulting in conflicts that left their mark in the bogs at Vimose, Kragehul, Ejsbøl and Thorsbjerg. Jørgen Ilkjær's work on the early third-century Illerup find (published in 14 volumes with more to follow, synthesised in Ilkjær 2000) has suggested a massive raid on east Jylland, launched as a maritime venture with up to 50 ships from Norway. The same pattern can be seen at other sites from the same period, like the later phase at Vimose. By the fourth century, the raiding seems to have been coming from Swedish Uppland, with a zone of fighting spreading through Skåne, Öland, even Gotland, and down into Denmark where it is reflected in the bog finds from Ejsbøl 2 and, again, Thorsbjerg (Ilkjær 2000: 67–73; see also Jørgensen *et al.* 2003).

This material can be coupled with the evidence of *naust* (boat-shed) finds from Norway's west coast, which imply a surprisingly large capacity to mount a marine military offensive as early as the pre-Roman Iron Age (Myhre 1997; Grimm 2001: 58–63). Along with the supporting settlement evidence, the bog sacrifices essentially begin to give us a 'history' of south Scandinavian warfare from this time up to the early Migration Period (this work is presented in Ilkjær 2000, though there is no bibliography – for detailed references see Fabech 1996, Nørgård Jørgensen & Clausen 1997,

and Jørgensen *et al.* 2003; similar work for the fourth-century BC Hjortspring deposit has been collected by Kaul 1988 and Randsborg 1995).

Many of these interpretations rest on the notion that the weapon sacrifices represent the arms of foreign troops defeated in a battle taking place near the site of deposition, while Andrén and Jørgensen (Jørgensen 2001: 15f) have suggested that they instead represent booty brought home from abroad by victorious Danish armies. In either scenario, the war booties certainly enable a reconstruction of major international events (as opposed to processes, such as trade and exchange) in a way not previously possible for this period.

A complementary pattern has been proposed with regard to the destruction levels at fortified sites from the same region, particularly in the Iron Age 'war zone' that seems to have left Öland especially vulnerable to repeated attack (*e.g.* Engström 1991, Näsman 1997). Again, in mapping the chronological sequence of fighting at these places, linked to the other material evidence, the picture of inter-regional political warfare is being sharpened.

From the bog finds, runic inscriptions of ownership on weapons, shields and items of personal equipment even tell us these warriors' names, the strange sound-combinations still jarring our ears eight centuries after their deaths. Through the Illerup runes we can encounter men called Nithijo, Wagnijo, Firha, Laguthewa, GauthR and Swarta (Ilkjær 2000: 115f); from Nydam nearly 100 years later we know of WagagastiR who left his name on a shield, and HarkilakR who inscribed his mark on a piece of jewellery (Rieck & Jørgensen 1997: 222).

Reading the Vikings

This unwritten history can now be extended all the way to the sixth century, the period to which the earliest written notices retrospectively refer. It is partly upon work of this kind that the revisionist view of the Viking period has drawn, with impressive results. It is no accident that while these developments were taking place in early Iron Age studies, a similar transformation was slowly gaining ground in late Iron Age research. It is in this that we can find the increasingly text-reliant archaeologies discussed above.

An important inspiration for much of the current work, especially by younger researchers, came from the project *Fra Stamme til Stat i Danmark* (‘From tribe to state in Denmark’: Mortensen & Rasmussen 1988, 1991). Presenting its conclusions in two volumes of papers, this project included several works that laid the foundations for the kind of prehistoric ‘histories’ of the early Iron Age discussed above, and also some of the first examples of late Iron Age textual archaeology. A particularly important paper here was Ulf Näsman’s advocation of historical analogies for Nordic prehistory (1988), a subject to which he returned a decade later (1998).

In Sweden, this work was expanded upon by Per Ramqvist (1991), who used Visigothic analogies to analyse the elites of middle Norrland. In Uppsala at the same time, Frands Herschend began to develop a more explicit integration of archaeology and text with two studies on *Beowulf* and Icelandic sources (1992, 1994), focusing on the nature of emerging royal power in late Iron Age Scandinavia. This research was one of the foundations for the project from which the bulk of recent research of this kind has emerged, the Uppsala-Stockholm collaboration *Svealand in the Vendel and Viking Periods* (SIV). The results have been published as a series of monographs, supported by numerous papers, the majority of which make extensive use of textual sources. They include studies in which runestones and genealogical poems have been employed to illuminate the mechanisms of early medieval kingship (Norr 1998); semiotic explorations of the hall concept, in relation to individual and collective identity (Herschend 1997a, 1998a, 2001 and related papers); and the role played by ‘aristocratic’ animal husbandry in the construction of elite identities, focusing on horses, hounds and hunting birds (Sundkvist 2001); several other monographs are in progress as the project concludes. We may note too that similar processes are underway in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, as for example in Jos Bazelmans’ analysis of military obligation in *Beowulf* (1999).

Mythology as a window on Iron Age power structures also proved a popular line of approach in the combination of texts and archaeology. The closing years of the twentieth century saw another work by Herschend (1996), Romare’s study of Langobard origin stories connected to Óðinn

(1997), and a series of thought-provoking pieces by Lotte Hedeager (1993, 1996, 1997a & b, 1998). These latter studies trace the ritual overtones of power and identity in northern Europe from the fall of Rome through the Migration Period; they include considerations of Nordic war rituals, and are reviewed in chapter 5; a note on the updated literature can be found in chapter 8.

These approaches were not the only integrations of archaeology and text on offer in late Iron Age research. During the same period, a more traditional model was proposed in Norway with the synthesis on the Oseberg ship burial (Christensen *et al.* 1992, especially Myhre's three papers on the Ynglinga dynasty and source criticism) and in Sweden by Åke Hyenstrand (1996). Archaeological collaborations were also considered by scholars from other disciplines, especially the history of religions. Some of these painted a positive picture of fruitful joint efforts (*e.g.* Steinsland 1986a), while others seemed to imply that archaeology's role was the traditional one of 'assisting' the textual scholars to verify or disprove the evidence of the written sources (*e.g.* Słupecki 1998b).

General works also appeared from the 'textual' archaeologists. During the course of the SIV project, and in the same year as Andrén's book on historical archaeology, Herschend published a kind of charter for his approaches (1997b). Here he proposed another threefold analytical process, working through what he called the intentional, the conceptual and the structural. Herschend argues that in looking at artefacts and texts together in this way, we join all our material in, "a human work or a manifestation of humanness … meant to reveal different levels of consciousness" (*ibid*: 77). Attempts at a synthesis of these developments were made by Dagfinn Skre (2001: 1–3) and myself (Price 2005d). In the latter paper, I referred to the creation of a 'new' Viking archaeology, partly text-driven and wholly integrated with the archaeological mainstream, but with a simultaneous concern to preserve the traditional research values on which Viking studies must rely. I return to these points below.

The value of the textual approach, as in the works quoted above, was stressed by one of the new 'Uppsala school', Svante Norr again. In viewing texts as containing an "immanent materiality", he has essentially come to

the same conclusions as John Moreland. I believe that Norr has also correctly identified this trend as a return to the same principle that guided the narrative school, in that they recognised the *necessity* for early medievalists to consider textual material. However,

> … that is far from maintaining that we should revive their theoretical position (if something scarcely existing can be revived). The point is, rather, to engage in new encounters with written records from our altered theoretical positions. Where narrative archaeology regarded different source categories as equally unproblematic we must regard them as equally problematic, meaning-laden sign systems. The texts may also strengthen our conceptual apparatus as we put them alongside material records and, in the process, expand our understanding of our process of inference.
>
> Norr 1998: 13

It is in this light that the present book should be viewed. Of course, in any attempt to work across disciplinary boundaries there are inevitable questions of competence, but these must be balanced against the fact of differing research agendas. Archaeologists working with early Scandinavian texts often possess no more than basic skills in the Old Norse languages, but at the same time they are following lines of enquiry utterly unlike those pursued by philologists. The depth of linguistic knowledge that a philologist would regard as a prerequisite for such studies may simply not be necessary for an archaeological examination of the same material. Not least, archaeologists should be able to *use* the results of research in these other disciplines, applying them in their own context of material culture studies, without trying to rework philological conclusions that are beyond their own abilities. The same is true for historians and historians of religions, and their respective fields. One might also observe that many scholars – from every branch of Viking studies – continue to build their arguments through the general citation of saga material as a primary source, simply bracketed with caveats as to its reliability.

As I have made clear, I regard both material culture and the written word as equally eloquent testimonies to the mental landscape of the past. While scholars from each sub-discipline of Viking studies may at times employ the same material sources – texts are the most common example – we will all ask different questions, and work at what Jens Peter Schjødt has

called different “analytical and cultural levels” (1996: 195). In the case of written sources, the purposes for which I wish to use them guide the manner in which I do so. Whether approaching objects or approaching text, my work in this book should therefore be regarded as *entirely* archaeological both in inspiration and agenda.

One of the key aspects of recent work of this kind on the Viking Age concerns transitions, mainly those made by the early medieval Scandinavian peoples from one culturally-constituted understanding of the world to another, fundamentally different in form. At its simplest, this process can be expressed in the change of religion from ‘paganism’ to Christianity, but in reality this extends to encompass a broad range of elements including political structures and the centralisation of state power, judicial constructs, social and gender relations, literacy, and many other factors. Common to all these is the notion of cognition, the particular mind-set and world-view of the pre-Christian North. This mentality, one half of the transformative equation from the Viking Age to the medieval period, forms a focus of this book in relation to the themes of religion and war outlined above.

We shall examine the growth of a cognitive archaeology shortly, but we need first to consider perhaps the most pertinent link between textual archaeology and historical studies which can be of use to us in our exploration of the Viking mind. This concerns the so-called *Annales* school and their work towards what has been termed the ‘social geology’ of the individual.

Annaliste archaeology and a historical anthropology of the Vikings

The roots of the *Annales* paradigm, representing the leading school of French historiography for much of the twentieth century, can be traced back to the late 1890s when scholars such as de la Blache, Durkheim and Berr began to register their disapproval of historical specificity and call for more generalising disciplines for the study of the past. Their sociological and geographical perspectives were enthusiastically adopted by the historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who in 1929 founded the journal *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* (later re-titled *Annales: economies, sociétés, civilisations*), from which the school of enquiry takes its name. Based on an explicit rejection of rigidly chronological, political history, *Annales* scholarship draws heavily on the incorporation of other disciplines to develop a concept of a 'human past' quite different from the event-led approaches of traditional narrative. The fundamental concept of *l'histoire globale*, or 'total history', first came to the fore with a second generation of *Annaliste* scholars led by Fernand Braudel (1949, 1964), who developed the framework of study for what he called a 'structural history'. In essence, the *Annales* approach conceptualises different historical processes operating at different scales, which can in turn be subjected to different scales of examination. By the mid-1960s, three main levels of multiscalar analysis had been proposed: Short term – *événements*: individuals; events; narrative understandings Medium term – *conjonctures*: historical cycles; history of eras, regions, societies Long term – *longue durée*: 'geo-history', climatic change; history of peoples; stable technologies Historians and sociologists like Gurvitch (1964), Hexter (1972) and Wallerstein (1982) developed Braudel's concepts, with particular attention to the interplay between the different time-scales. The solution was felt to be a problem-oriented approach – the so-called *l'histoire problème* – and above all, a focus on cognition. This is primarily expressed in the other key *Annales* concept, the notion of *world-views (mentalités)*, informing every aspect of a structural history but ultimately deriving from the medium term in a cycle as follows:

mentalités → *événements* → *conjonctures* (origin of *mentalités*) → *longue durée* → *mentalités*

In this spirit, during the late 1960s and 70s a third generation of *Annaliste* scholars further renewed the discipline, with a series of widely-read works in

which the individual life and a discrete exploration of place came to assume the greatest prominence as the window through which to view the successive levels of a structural history. It was at this time that the *Annales* paradigm emerged triumphant in French historical studies and began to be adopted elsewhere in Europe and especially in Anglo-American research (Dosse 1994).

Like their predecessors, the classic works of these scholars largely concentrated on the medieval period, with the lens of study focused at different levels of resolution. Among the central motifs were the cultural biography of settlements, such as Le Roy Ladurie's famous study of peasant society in Montaillou (1975) and his deconstruction of the carnival at Romans (1979). Others focused on popular belief in contact with state dogma, especially that of the later Inquisition (Ginzberg 1982 & 1983, both first published in the 60s and 70s). The tradition was continued into the 1980s and 90s by scholars such as Schmitt, with his 1994 study of medieval beliefs in the restless dead. The concept of *mentalités* has also been employed in a similar biographical fashion by non-*Annaliste* historians who have gone beyond the notion of a collective mind-set to additionally embrace cultural values. Examples here include Georges Duby's study of medieval chivalry (1984) and, in Sweden, Peter Englund's work on the Thirty Years' War (1993 & 2000). The same approaches have also been used with success in the field of military history, first by Martin Middlebrook (1971) in a study of soldiers from different backgrounds who all took part in the catastrophic first day of the Somme offensive. Tracing their lives up to 1st July 1916, and afterwards if they survived, a single day is used to illuminate the structure of British society for decades either side of it. A similar technique has been employed by Evan Connell to analyse Custer's defeat at the Little Bighorn (1985).

The potential applications of these ideas to material culture studies are considerable, with their ability to capture scales of time from moments to eras, but *Annaliste* perspectives were in fact adopted relatively late by archaeologists. Apart from a brief venture in France (Schnapp 1981) it was not until the late 1980s, parallel with the cohesion of post-processualism, that three edited volumes were published on archaeological applications of *Annales* ideas, representing broadly post-processual (Hodder 1987) and processual (Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992) viewpoints. At the time of the first

edition of this book, these three volumes were the only general works to explicitly take up *Annales* perspectives on archaeology; even individual papers were very few in number (*e.g.* Skeates 1990). Furthermore, the works by Hodder and Bintliff were criticised for their undifferentiated readings of Braudel, and above all for their exclusive reliance on his ideas as representing an *Annales* 'school' that, it is argued, does not in reality constitute such a definable methodology (Delano Smith 1992; Chippendale 1993: 34f).

While it is certainly true that *Annales* scholarship is characterised not by its adherence to any orthodox line but by its willingness to accommodate diverse and competing categories of thought, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the idea of an *Annales* school has long been accepted by historiographers (cf. Burke 1990; Héruber 1994; Clark 1999). Moreover, in archaeology these critics overlooked the explicit and important employment of *Annaliste* methodologies to bridge the theoretical gap between the polarised positions of New Archaeology and post-processualism. In this context, with its central focus on the 'ancient mind', the *Annales* paradigm can be usefully combined with aspects of the cognitive studies considered below, and it is in this context that it has found a ready place in the archaeological theory of the twenty-first century.

In all the major works of later *Annaliste* history, it is groups of individuals, or social patterns accessed through them, that provide the linking continuity for the crucial realm of *mentalités*. Indeed, Le Roy Ladurie (1979: 370) has argued persuasively that these tapestries of lives and experiences "show, preserved in cross section, the social and intellectual strata and structures … a complete geology, with all its colours and contortions". Jacques Le Goff, one of the most prolific of *Annaliste* scholars, went further (1989: 405): "it becomes possible to approach a specific and unique person, and to write a true biography through which a historically explained individual can emerge out of a given society and period, intimately linked to them yet also impressing on them his or her own personality and actions. From the chorus of human voices, a particular note and style can be made to stand out".

In the light of this view of contextualised individuals, it is curious that there have been no attempts to write *Annaliste* studies of the Viking Age. Though much valuable work has been done in the way of focused social history – biographies of royal personages such as Knútr, for example, or

studies of the campaigns of 1066 – little of this material has moved far beyond the confines of power politics. In moving to a more humble (and more informative?) level of society, we may think here of Céline's maxim, adopted by several of the *Annaliste* scholars: *Tout ce qui est intéressant se passe dans l'ombre. On ne sait rien de la véritable histoire des hommes* (quoted as epigraph to Ginzburg 1982). This is equally applicable to the late Iron Age, especially for the sorcerers and Óðinnic warriors that we will consider here, who can be the perfect guides into the murkier shadows of the Viking world-view. We can use this fluid boundary between religion and war to illuminate the dialectic of forces operating in the later Viking Age, the social contradictions and contending *mentalités* which laid the ground for the adoption of Christianity in Scandinavia and the region's integration into the social environment of literate Europe. In so doing, we may also build up a composite 'structural history' of the kind discussed above.

Spiritual belief can be plausibly put forward as one of the most appropriate aspects of society through which to study these phenomena, dealing as we are with the essentially unprovable and, up to a point, the insubstantial: attitudes, thoughts, emotions and responses. It is in this arena that we find the archaeology of power, the archaeology of fear (both fear of knowledge and fear of its lack, the unknown) and the archaeology of hope, and thus the territory of this thesis.

Such a search for the 'essence' of ancient lives is in itself hardly a new idea, and with all its varying degrees of prevarication it is one that goes back to the roots of our discipline. It has been especially prevalent in the post-war period, running as a continuum from Mortimer Wheeler's 'archaeology of people' (1954) to Colin Renfrew's 'archaeology of mind' and 'archaeology of mental processes' (1982a, 1994), the latter albeit clothed anew as cognitive processualism. In order to understand what this means for the study of the Viking Age, we must briefly examine the archaeology of the period in relation to theoretical developments in the discipline as a whole.

The Other and the Odd?

Students of archaeological theory have become used to the relatively uniform manner in which the intellectual development of the discipline is presented in academic fora. Both textbooks and courses trace a familiar path from the

origins of archaeological thought, through the famously-termed ‘long sleep’ until the advent of the New Archaeology (Renfrew 1982b: 6), to the concomitant development of Marxist and structuralist interpretations, and on to the impact of post-modernism together with its epistemological and phenomenological offshoots of the 1980s and 90s. For the present, we seem to be enjoying the comfortably vague reassurance of a ‘transitional phase’ in archaeological theory, in which complimentary discourses gently chide one another in a spirit of happy pluralism.

Archaeology is a complex discipline, and so much more than an illusorily sequential parade of paradigms. Such a linear view of the subject is still propagated surprisingly widely, with an unfortunate emphasis on Anglo-European and North American perspectives at the expense of other traditions. There is also a tendency to homogenise the early trajectories of archaeological thinking. What we now think of as modern archaeological method – as founded by men such as Thomsen, Worsaae, Montelius, and the rest – actually emerged from far more complex intellectual currents of the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries than we usually credit, and from circumstances in which women had considerable influence. At this time, the development of ‘scientific’ archaeology was only one possible outcome for a subject that was equally composed of poetics and literary aestheticism, of subjective emotion actively embraced. This was subtly different from the National Romanticism that would succeed it in the late 1800s, and the other paths that this process might have taken form a vital, but largely unknown, backdrop to the present state of archaeological theory (see Notelid 2000, 2001a & b on this early phase of Nordic prehistoric enquiry; also Bokholm’s 2000 biography of Montelius’ wife, Agda, and Nordbladh’s 2002 paper on Pehr Tham).

I have mentioned this here because it serves as a neat parallel for what I will later say about the archaeology of the so-called Fourth World of indigenous peoples, and its application to the study of the Viking Age: there are *still* alternative routes that we may take in our exploration of the past. This also illustrates the fallacy of assuming that old work is necessarily inferior to more modern research. No archaeologist would assert this openly, of course, but the meaning is frequently implicit in the one-way street of theoretical progress that is often presented. As we shall see in relation to Old Norse religion, when we look beyond the antiquated syntax of the time it is clear that

the ideas discussed in the nineteenth century were in many cases more constructively imaginative than today's interpretations.

With all the above in mind, I have striven to write an integrated text which reflects the intellectual seams that I have mined in its creation. Some of these approaches may be relatively unfamiliar to early medieval scholars (see Price 2005d), and thus my discussion here includes a short introduction against which the work below can be oriented.

Conflict in the archaeology of cognition

Cognition is a problematic term in archaeology, with a simultaneous potential for the most profound and the most superficial insights into antiquity. The profession has been rightly criticised for producing far too many 'straw people' propounding a shallow grasp of complex issues under the guise of theoretical awareness (Johnson 1999: 182), and this is particularly true of cognitive studies. The same sentiment is echoed in Flannery & Marcus' caustic view of what they see as cognitive archaeology's fall from scientific rigour (1993). Aside from the inevitable question as to whether one might find oneself counted among such individuals, it is clear that the very nature of cognitive enquiry brings difficulties.

Essentially, cognitive studies concern the archaeology of the intangible as inferred from the material. Many archaeologists, especially on the positivist wing of the discipline, would argue that it is nearly or completely impossible to access the mentalities of past people, as opposed to the patterns in material culture that those mentalities have produced and which have been preserved through the taphonomic variables of the archaeological record. Others, of whom I am one, argue that archaeology has a unique opportunity for the recovery of such data in a form inaccessible by any other means, and I would link this to the *Annaliste* notion of *mentalités* outlined above. We can briefly examine this conflict, looking first at its uneasy incorporation into processualist theory, and the emergence of so-called cognitive processualism.

Although strands of this thinking were coming together in North American archaeology during the late 1970s (*e.g.* Fritz 1978 on 'palaeopsychology'), in many ways cognitive processualism entered the scene in a formalised sense with Colin Renfrew's inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1982(a), in which he set out the desirability of a 'scientific' investigation of the way in which past people thought. The major breakthroughs came a decade later, when several

general publications appeared such as Renfrew's second call to arms for a softer alternative to an already established post-processualism (1993) and his collection of papers with Zubrow on *The Ancient Mind* (1994). Essentially, these approaches are linked together by the notion that the analysis of prehistoric mind-sets can be incorporated into the systems thinking that characterises processualist archaeology. To take one of the most famous examples, cognition could be viewed as the kind of 'psychological subsystem' that Clarke suggested as one core of the culture complex (1968: Fig. 17), or the 'ideational systems' still commonly found in Transatlantic theory.

The weight of cognitive processualist research has focused on the evolution of human thought at the most fundamental level, looking at early hominids and their mental processes. A significant place in this must go to the work of Steven Mithen on patterned behaviour among early hunter-gatherers (*e.g.* 1990, 1996) and the recent achievements of the McDonald Institute scholars at Cambridge and their circle (*e.g.* Mellars & Gibson 1996; Davidson & Noble 1996; Mithen 1998; Renfrew & Scarre 1999; Renfrew 2007; Renfrew & Morley 2009). Virtually the only Scandinavian archaeologist who has ventured into this terrain is Bo Gräslund (2001), with his comprehensive investigation into the cognitive-biological origins of the human species, and especially its sexual evolution.

This is probably the only effective way of approaching the world of the early hominids beyond the confines of biology, ethology and the archaeological analysis of crude technologies. However, once these first humans are left behind, cognitive processualism becomes problematic. In general terms it risks being watered down into banality, becoming at worst a kind of "linguistic ploy to capture the middle ground while minimising the influence of other approaches" (Johnson 1999: 181). This becomes more serious when what is essentially the notion of biological determinism is applied, explicitly or implicitly, to the cultural development of complex societies. The search for normative principles and cross-cultural generalisations that are necessary for a processualist perspective to be maintained have a tendency to rest in this context on an unspoken ethnocentricity, extending the values of Western culture to ancient societies that clearly had very different responses. This problem will be taken up below when we look at Viking archaeology in the context of indigenous peoples.

The ‘mainstream’ of cognitive studies is still dominated by the archaeology of religion and spiritual belief (*e.g.* Insoll 2004, 2011; Kyriakidis 2007; Whitley & Hays-Gilpin 2008), but all forms of perception are included. These can concern anything from categorisation and the conscious ordering of the environment to regulatory concepts such as law. This work has been much more loosely anchored in theory, being defined more by its subject matter than specific method. Structuralism, with its potential for generalising models, has not surprisingly proved a popular line of approach. However, a more pronounced concern for symbolism, semiotics and an acknowledgement of the subjective has drawn cognitive archaeology under the umbrella of post-processualism almost from its inception (Hodder’s *Symbols in Action* from 1982 is the type example here, appearing in the same year as Renfrew gave impetus to what would become the cognitive processual wave). The topics embraced by this work are too numerous to more than mention here: the study of ‘art’ and imagery, iconography, the body, gender, identity, ideology, power, literacy, language and even the concept of time itself have all been pursued from an explicitly ‘cognitive’ perspective. In every sense of the term, the growth of cognitive archaeology has been rapid that a Reader in the subject has long since been compiled (Whitley 1998). Most introductions to the discipline also feature sections on the mind, ‘looking at thoughts’, and so on (*e.g.* Johnson 2010: ch. 6; Renfrew & Bahn 2016: pt. II).

Cognition and the Vikings

The impact of mainstream cognitive archaeology on the more specific study of the Viking Age has been slow in coming, in part because every other area of Viking archaeology has undergone a period of rapid growth during the last few decades. Our information on all aspects of the artefactual, environmental and settlement remains of the early medieval Scandinavians has increased many times over. Particularly important discoveries have come from urban archaeology in the early towns of Scandinavia and the colonial settlements, from excavations on rural sites throughout the Viking world, and from the growth of metal detector use. For the most part, these developments have come within very specific aspects of the period, concentrating upon artefactual typology and refinements in chronology, art-historical studies, settlement and cemetery archaeology, and analyses of early medieval economic systems. From this broadly empirical foundation a consistent, general model of Viking-

Age society has been built up, published in its details in individual reports and presented as an overview in updated form through synthetic volumes at regular intervals.

The speed of this expansion has in some ways brought its own problems. Despite the immense achievements of these years, the emphasis on empirical approaches and a concentration upon economic modes of explanation has been favoured at the expense of social and especially cognitive interpretations.

In the late 1980s this picture began to change, and an increasing number of Viking researchers started to address exactly these issues of behavioural study, using paths of analysis quite different to more traditional studies of the period – some of these have been reviewed above in the context of 'textual' archaeology (see also Price 1998b, 2005d, 2015a & c). Tending to focus on discussions of power, religion, social structure and ideology, these new approaches are characterised by an increased awareness of the meaning content of material culture, and in particular the sophistication of Viking-Age symbolic articulation and representation. Gender studies form a central part of this movement, and is in this area that some of the most rapid changes have taken place in Viking research. In this context it is vitally important to stress that recent theoretical perspectives on the Viking Age have not been proposed as *replacements* for earlier models – in effect as a 'new' tradition – but as pluralistic enhancements to them, what could in Swedish be called a form of *kompletteringsarbete* (a useful word which means, approximately, 'work of complimentary addition'). In many instances social and cognitive models are in no way incompatible with existing, empiricist ones, and it should also be noted that the artefactual and art-historical researches which form the foundation of archaeological Viking studies will continue to do so regardless of the interpretative framework within which they are utilised.

The application of these perspectives characterised a good deal of my own earlier work on the period. One starting point for me was the focus on landscape in the mainstream archaeology of cognition. In the 1990s scholars such as Richard Bradley (1993a, 1998, 2000), Christopher Tilley (1994), John Barrett (1994) and others explored notions of monumentality, and the relationship of prehistoric people to their ancestors as negotiated through traces of their physical presence in the landscape. The notion of 'the past in the past' is central here, the way in which ancient cultures understood not only

the monuments that they built themselves, but also those constructed earlier (Bradley 2002; Jones 2007; see Thäte 2007 and Hållans Stenholm 2012 for Viking-Age examples). In this vein I worked through a series of research projects to examine the Viking-Age built environment as it developed over time, especially in colonial or 'sacred' contexts. In particular I looked for signs of the mentalities underpinning the specific choices involved: *why* a certain type of mound, with a certain pattern of contents, was raised in a certain place, in certain spatial relationships to other monuments of their own certain types, and so on. My work focused variously on the Russian river systems (Price 1994b, 1998a, 2000d), the colonial architecture of Iceland (Price 1994c, 1995a) and Gamla Uppsala (Price 1994d, 1997; Price & Wikborg 1998). These ideas were finally drawn together in a synthetic discussion of the way in which Viking-Age Scandinavians perceived the interplay of power, place and space, both at home and in the context of interaction with other cultures (Price 2000e). A crucial element in all these negotiations, which of course had their own internal strata of affiliations within Scandinavian society, were the Vikings themselves.

The growing need to understand this group and their place in their culture has been mentioned above. In the context of the crisis of confidence in Viking studies that I have described, a search for a deeper understanding of these individuals formed an obvious prerequisite for the study of cultural interaction that was the original subject of my doctorate. However, as work progressed it was this question that soon came to dominate the book itself, revealing more and more layers of potential study. As the original analysis of cultural interaction turned into a more basic examination of cultural definition, the theme of identity came naturally to assume greater prominence, and in particular its social construction in relation to the patterns of power emerging in early medieval Scandinavia. The role of gender in the constitution of this Viking identity seemed crucial from an early stage in the research, as did the ritual practices (in both religious and secular contexts) for which archaeology provides such a wealth of evidence. This shift of emphasis in the research clearly brought with it a radical change in the source material under scrutiny, moving from the settlements of Anglo-Scandinavian Northumbria to a broad range of data from the history of religion, folklore studies and Old Norse textual scholarship, in addition to the existing historical material. Within

archaeology, my inspiration originated primarily from the above-mentioned work on the ancient mind.

In essence, this project had become a cognitive exploration of the Vikings, in the context of their relationship to the rest of the Scandinavian population and the other cultures with which they came into contact: what they were, what they were not, and what they became having left Viking activities behind them. But how to approach this?

Others without Othering

An obvious beginning lay with other studies of ancient mentalities that have also focused on themes especially relevant to the present book, concerned with human emotions and appetites of various kinds. Some of this work, such as Taylor's *The Prehistory of Sex* (1996), takes a decidedly modern spin on the interpretation of early mind-sets, though one of oblique relevance to the discussions in chapter 3 below. Others are more profound, as with the growing literature on ancient sensuality which has concentrated on classical Athens (*e.g.* Dalby 1995; Davidson 1997) and Rome (*e.g.* Dalby 2000), alongside the many writings that have appeared on Greek homosexuality. The sensitivity of these accounts, focusing primarily on attitudes to food and sex, has been a model for my own work with the Vikings which in the following chapters also addresses sexual identity and its social location. Davidson's study of Greek hedonism has been a particular inspiration, and his nuanced reading of our dialogue with the Athenians could equally apply to the Viking Age:

There are two main dangers in approaching the Greeks. The first is to think of them as our cousins and to interpret everything in our own terms. We are entering a very different world, very strange and very foreign, a world inconceivably long ago, centuries before Christ or Christianity … a world indeed without our centuries, or weeks or minutes or markings of time. And yet these Greeks will sometimes seem very familiar, very lively, warm and affable. Occasionally we might even get their jokes. We must be careful, however, that we are not being deceived by false friends. Often what seems most familiar, most obvious, most easy to understand is in fact the most peculiar thing of all. On the other hand, we must resist the temptation to push the Greeks further into outer space than is necessary. They are not our cousins, but neither are they our opposites. They are just different, just trying to be themselves.

Central to all this work, of course, is the problematic idea of the Other. Deriving in large part from Lévinas' philosophy of ethics (1987; Peperzak 1993), the concept also owes much to the work of G. H. Mead on the rational self held in tension with the 'significant other' (1934). These two scholars' work embodies an important dichotomy between the Other as a personal and potentially reflexive socio-psychological category, and a meeting with it as an ethical dilemma on a professional level that does not need to be personal at all. These relationships are often unconsciously blurred by archaeologists, who have mostly employed the term as a useful image for the mass of dead humanity that silently faces us through the medium of the material culture that we study, unreachable directly but nevertheless constantly present as we touch the things that the Other has touched.

The idea entered Swedish archaeological theory again during the late 1990s. In my brief comments here I have found helpful Svante Norr's discussion of the term as a key to the archaeological use of texts (1998: 9–19), in which he argues that, "the meeting between us as archaeologists and the past Other … involves a meeting of two horizons of understanding or languages in a kind of dialogue between participants who from an ethical point of view should be considered equal" (*ibid*: 10). This question of ethics is crucial. I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Price 2004c) and will expand on it below, but we can also mention here Johan Hegardt's deconstruction of "the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other" (1997: 266), and his argument that the latter must be the central conceptual tool in our understanding of the past. He has also identified the core problem of processual archaeology in this respect, in its implicit efforts to make the Other the Same (*ibid*: 257).

Håkan Karlsson has also approached the Other through what is to my mind a rather partial reading of Heidegger's notion of Being. He interprets the distance between archaeologists and their subject as a 'contemplative' relationship, at the centre of which is a reflective response to the ancient lives that archaeological categories represent (1998, 1999). However, this presents another fundamental problem, because the archaeologist's voluntary relegation to voyeuristic passivity, seemingly without direction, is

simultaneously a resignation of active engagement with the past. If some archaeologists would see excavation as a process of careful interrogation, in which we (might) obtain answers to the specific questions that we think to ask, for Karlsson the Other seems to be expected to offer of itself. Ultimately this seems little different to the extremes of positivist belief that we simply 'dig up' a past that provides its own self-evident interpretation through the application of common sense; perhaps Karlsson would argue that processualism looks at prehistory through an analytical intelligence, whereas a contemplative archaeology lets it into our hearts.

This essential impasse of irreconcilable perspectives was laid at the door of post-processualism as the single most fundamental problem in archaeological theory at the turn of the millennium, an accusation just as hotly rejected by the post-processualists themselves. Others saw postprocessualism as something that broadened the entire framework of debate, rather than setting up an opposing camp (*e.g.* Hegardt 1997). The spectre of empty relativism conjured up by limitless deconstruction loomed large over this discussion, but to a great extent this problem has been satisfactorily resolved, or at least contextualised, for some considerable time.

The end of the 1990s saw a move towards shared experience and reciprocity of interpretation, as a means of approaching the differentness of the past. This was attempted at sites such as Stonehenge (Bender 1998), and Leskernick on Dartmoor (Bender, Hamilton & Tilley 1997; Tilley, Hamilton & Bender 2000), with variable success. The only endeavour of this kind that carried its ambition through into the long-term is the extraordinary project of explicitly self-reflexive fieldwork at Çatalhöyük in Turkey from 1993–2017 (Hodder 1996–2014; see www.catalhoyuk.com for a full bibliography of this remarkable acheievement, that uniquely charts the changing theories of the past three decades through the practical medium of fieldwork, including the dimension of built-in pluralistic critique).

At that time, other scholars such as John Bintliff (*e.g.* 1993, 2000) proposed a solution in the promotion of archaeology as a 'human science of complementary discourses', in the spirit of Wittgenstein. This would supposedly accord space for all perspectives in parallel, a kind of short-cut to a platform of constructive opposition. This is one of the most optimistic alternatives on offer, but there are nevertheless problems with this too. As

Johnson has again observed, “the search for such a middle ground all too often becomes an easy replacement for the hard work of serious yet sympathetic critique of one’s own and others’ theoretical positions” (1999: 187). We can all agree to disagree, but where does this leave us?

In particular, where does this leave the archaeologist’s search for the individual and the ancient mind? It is easy to feel a sense of hopelessness. Indeed, the debilitative potential inherent in the current theoretical trajectory was presciently foreseen by Richard Bradley, in a crucial article from 1993(b). Playing on Clarke’s idea of archaeology’s loss of innocence, with which he famously heralded the dawn of the New Archaeology twenty years earlier, the title of Bradley’s paper says it all: ‘Archaeology: the loss of nerve’. Addressing a problem that still threatens to paralyse the theoretical debate today, he gives a shape to our new-found fear of using the controlled imagination that has always been necessary for the investigation of the past. James Davidson has again written perceptively on this post-modern dilemma in his studies on the hermeneutics of Athenian sensuality:

Greek civilisation, according to this [post-modernist] interpretation, is an irretrievably alien culture, constituting a separate sealed world with its own peculiar possibilities for experience. … In fetishizing a culture’s representations of the world in this way, Foucault and his followers sometimes seem to forget about the world itself, which is still waving through the window, as if what a culture says is, is, on some important level, as if the Greeks walked around in a virtual reality they had constructed for themselves from discourse.

Davidson 1997: xxv

Norr echoed this with reference to another post-modernist icon who found archaeological favour in the 1980s, by emphasising how “the language of Derrida is not relevant to human life as everyday experience” (1998: 10). However, he also made the point that the same applies to any metalanguage, “whether post-modern, realist, positivist or some other”. *All* of these narratives are inevitably detached and exclusive, in a manner which has unfortunately become part of what Bo Gräslund has called the ‘liturgy’ of archaeological theory (1989: 47). Certainly, the achievements of postprocessualism should not be under-estimated, and the boundaries of the discipline have been

expanded since the advent of these ideas in the mid-1980s in ways that with several decades of hindsight were in my opinion almost entirely beneficial. Not least, this book is itself a product of this development and could not have been written without it.

To my mind, one of the defining characteristics of the middle years of post-processual archaeology (when the first edition of this book was being written) was the marked degree of intellectual comfort that some – by no means all – its adherents afforded themselves. In their defence, this was primarily manifested in small self-indulgences, such as the trend for creating an imaginary interlocutor to supposedly question or critique the author's ideas on behalf of the reader, and often in the context of the latter's education (*e.g.* Tilley 1991: ch.11 and appendix; Preucel & Hodder 1996: 667–77; Hodder 1999 and Johnson 1999 throughout). Of course, a conceit of this kind did not provide an external viewpoint at all, and it would be difficult to find a more potent symbol of the reduction of archaeological enquiry to an internalised monologue, masquerading as a dialogue. In the field, however, the situation is more serious. Here I would argue that very few of those who considered themselves active post-processualists or 'self-reflexive' archaeologists put themselves in a position which *genuinely* challenged their ideas, which truly placed them outside the Western intellectual context that so many of them have tried to deconstruct. The same applies to the idea of archaeology as performance, of which the most developed example was probably Michael Shanks' long collaboration with contemporary dramatists (Pearson & Shanks 2001). The more provocative and confrontational the departure from academic convention, the more these approaches seem to embody what they are trying to reject. This was indeed "archaeology as theatre", in Tilley's contentious phrase from 1989, and its practitioners increasingly appeared to be pursuing "an art which tells us more about themselves than about anything else, and what it reveals about them is, quite frankly, rather dull" (Malone & Stoddart 2000: 458).

At one level, of course, it is impossible to move outside one's culture, but it *is* possible to bring ideas to a new human context and to explore what happens when that meeting takes place. Again, it may be significant that most of the archaeologists that I have encountered who are trying to work in this

way would probably not take on a theoretical 'affiliation' at all, while nevertheless remaining solidly theoretically-aware.

Of course, all this also relates to the risk of Othering the Vikings, of making them into a reductive social category – something "rich and strange" – that is more a product of our own prejudice and bias than reflective of any past reality (Mountz 2009). With this comes a sense of marginalisation, in which the Othered is culturally subordinated through juxtaposition with claimed norms in a discourse of colonial dominance (cf. Svanberg 2003a). Awareness of the phenomenon has a long tradition, seen for example in Said's classic 1978 study of Orientalism, and the push back against it continues now in studies of the subaltern voice (*e.g.* Sharp 2009). It should be clear that in this book, the term is *not* used in the colonial sense of establishing a false binary, but as an opposition to an interpretive paradigm that in 2002 was very much the norm, a received wisdom limiting curiosity and new ideas (in line with how the Other is treated in Harris & Cipolla 2017: ch. 10). Above all, in viewing the Vikings in this way, the sense was to make them *un*familiar again, to recover a lost nuance in their complexity, sophistication and variation.

With these caveats in mind, it is at this point that we can make perhaps the most important contextual link to situation in Viking-Age Scandinavia, via the Sámi people who formed a large proportion of its population: the archaeology of the so-called Fourth World.

Indigenous archaeologies and the Vikings

It is important to emphasise again that we should not isolate Viking research from the developments that have been taking place in the profession as a collective (cf. Price 2004c). Strangely as it seems to me now, in 2018 as the second edition goes to press, this sentiment appears still not to be shared by everyone in Viking studies, and the debate continues. For me, this centres on the ongoing call for a multivocal, pluralised archaeology with a truly global (but not global*ised*) equality of access that began in the mid-1980s. This movement has been characterised above all by the development of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), its influential series of *One World Archaeology* volumes with more than fifty titles now published, and its journal *Archaeologies*. Especially important here is the post-colonial legacy, and the reactions of Western archaeologists to the demands of the Third and Fourth Worlds for access to their own past, and the right to interpret or relate to it in

the manner of their choice. Central to this is the primary concern given by many indigenous groups and descendant communities to concepts of the sacred, particularly in relation to the dead. From this has developed the debate on cultural property, repatriation and the reburial issue (for a historical introduction to the debate, see Ucko 1987 on WAC; for overviews of indigenous archaeology, see Layton 1989a & b, Carmichael *et al.* 1994, Atalay 2006, Smith & Wobst 2010; Greenfield 1996 and Fforde *et al.* 2001 introduce the repatriation debate).

I would still argue that it is in fact within the broad church of this 'world archaeology' that we may find the brightest future of the discipline, developing from a combination of unaligned theoretical consciousness and a perception of ethical responsibility. It was therefore with some concern that in 2002 one could observe how the indigenous perspective was almost totally absent from the general introductions to archaeological thought used in western European teaching. Hodder's classic *Reading the Past* (2nd ed. 1991) contained less than two pages on the subject, while in *The Archaeological Process* (1999) he subsumed the issues in a discussion of globalism without ever actually bringing them up specifically; Dark (1995) omitted the indigenous voice completely; Johnson, in his otherwise excellent introduction to theory, absorbed the entire Fourth World without comment into 'archaeology and politics' and makes only very oblique reference to these issues (1999: 13, 125ff; the second edition made this more explicit, but confined to only three pages, Johnson 2010: 208ff).

This was remedied only by a couple of articles in Preucel & Hodder's anthology, compiled as the impact of postprocessualism began to be diluted (1996: part VIII). Indeed, virtually the only other exception to this was Bjørnar Olsen's *Fra ting til tekst* (1997), and here it is significant firstly that Olsen is himself a specialist in Sámi archaeology, and secondly that he works in Norway, a country to which these issues are of immediate relevance. When the first edition of this present book appeared, there were signs that a change was on the way, for example in Hodder's *Archaeological Theory Today* (2001) which for the first time explicitly included post-colonial approaches, and Gamble's then-new introductory text, *Archaeology: the basics*, in which he became one of the first to use the Fourth World as a coda to Trigger's threefold division of archaeological politics (2001: 2; cf. Trigger 1989). Back

in 2002 it remained to be seen whether this represented the start of a genuine paradigm shift, or a small deviation from a familiar path. In 2018 as this goes to press, there have been small but significant changes as these perspectives have been integrated into the general practice of theory, rather than treated distinctly (cf. Renfrew & Bahn 2016: chs 14 & 15; Harris & Cipolla 2017: ch. 10).

This is not to say that the 'world archaeology' movement is without its problems. WAC itself still retains a core power-base and agenda in the developed countries, despite the varied nationalities on its committees. This reflects back onto the material and our approach to it. The critical problem still with archaeology's embrace of the Other as embodied by traditional cultures, is that it is nevertheless *through* the agency of archaeologists that the Other is allowed to allegedly speak. A typical example is provided in Shanks' *Experiencing the Past* (1992: 112), when the repatriation claims of the Zuni people in the American Southwest are discussed in terms of "the significance of the dynamic object". Converting the demands of indigenous peoples into European academic language may well be relevant within that specific context – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with Shanks' analysis – but the crucial point is that it says nothing at all about those making the original statement, nor about what they actually said and meant.

As archaeologists congratulate themselves on providing an egalitarian platform for the indigenous voice, the latter refuses to be homogenised and furthermore may simply not care to be 'welcomed' to a debate in which it has no interest at any level other than its own defence. It is fascinating that so few theoreticians have paid more than lip service to the fact that for many people *the idea of archaeology itself* – let alone any theoretical position within such a discipline – is at best utterly irrelevant and at worst actually offensive or distressing. This is quite unlike the indifference of someone who does not happen to have an explicit interest in the past, but rather has its basis in a culturally-embedded view of the world which has little sympathy for the entire fabric of Western intellectual thought within which the idea of archaeological enquiry developed.

In this sense, it may be that a literal, as opposed to figurative, confrontation with the Other is rather more than some theorists can cope with. Post-processualists sometimes portrayed their processualist colleagues as

being afraid of subjectivity, of fearing the loss of control over the illusion of scientific method. And yet if we look at post-processualism in a Fourth World context, even the most eminent figures in what has become a kind of alternative orthodoxy risk becoming merely irrelevant, embarrassingly square.

Part of the reason for this lies in the circumstances in which these ideas have developed. The American processual archaeologist Peter Whiteley (2002: 415) has suggested that, "post-processualists … may be more open-minded, but the terms of their conceptual relativism are largely defined in the metropolitan space of the university rather than the cosmopolitan space of plural cultural reality". Whiteley seems to see the solution in a rather bizarre understanding of indigenous oral history, in which the latter speaks essentially the same language of empirically testable truthclaims as processual science, albeit expressed in a different vocabulary of verifiable stories (2002: 407). This misses the point that these two perspectives emerge from utterly different concepts of reality, but Whiteley's critique of postprocessualism is still valid in this context.

A sharper insight into this was presented several years earlier by Christopher Chippindale, in an *Antiquity* editorial from 1995. Reflecting on his rock art studies and work with the indigenous peoples of Arnhem Land in Australia, he argued for the academic benefits of encounters with an Other that can talk back:

You can see another side of this [the archaeologist's distance from the past] in the proposals of the post-modern thinkers who diffuse across the world from my own archaeology department in Cambridge; intended to be self-consciously radical, their visions of what prehistoric worlds might have been like seem too dependent on the encircled ideas of academics in other disciplines who also lead *bourgeois* lives by the fixed conventions of the decade. Inward-looking shall write for inward-looking. If you were to read that work in Arnhem Land, where you may encounter a notice by the road-side announcing 'Diversion, road closed due to ceremonies', it would seem cosy and timid. Frankly, these attempts at different approaches are not *odd* enough: which is a sign that their creators, like all of us, should go more often to Deaf Adder Creek or – better – to somewhere further removed from their home environments (since the last thing Deaf Adder Creek could do with is mobs of archaeologists in search of the exotic).

Chippindale 1995: 437f

Chippindale's idea of the 'odd' is perhaps significant in that the concept was not expressed as 'theory' at all, but as a comment in a journal editorial. I believe it encapsulates exactly what I am aiming for in this study of the Viking Age, especially in the context of a pan-Scandinavian analysis that considers the Sámi alongside the Norse. Linked to a global commitment along the lines of the WAC-model or something similar, as with Davidson's Greeks an 'odd' archaeology simply acknowledges the past's right to be itself, irrespective of (or even because of) how peculiar it appears to us.

Crucially important here is that this feeling for the potential 'difference' of prehistory must be something that ultimately derives from our analysis of the material itself, and its relationship to the other elements of the past artefactual environment. We must be receptive to this, but it cannot be a preconception that we wish to apply as an agenda in its own right, like Karlsson's 'contemplation' or an active search for what our culture perceives as the weirder or more profound aspects of the archaeological record. This is a charge sometimes leveled against those who work with indigenous peoples, and especially in a spiritual context, for example by Kehoe (2000: 45; 2002) who has argued – as above – that any concept of the Other is inevitably projected through a racist lens as something inferior to ourselves. In some extreme cases this is certainly true – we are all familiar with the kind of Westerners who regard indigenous peoples as founts of unspoiled natural wisdom, and who thereby promote a patronising notion of cultural primitivism. In general, however, such critique wrongly conflates a respectful acknowledgement of difference with a value judgement.

As Chippindale stresses, the pursuit of an 'odder' archaeology is not about a quest for the exotic, the fossilisation of unfamiliar cultures in the museum display of a colonialising Romantic. While we should be honest enough to admit to a certain thrill of displacement in our interactions with indigenous cultures and their world-view – if indeed that is what we feel – we should nevertheless remember that socially-embedded belief systems do not involve a juxtaposition of the sacred (read: exotic) with the mundane; the two are inseparable. The completely ordinary social context of most ritual performance in traditional cultures is rarely stressed enough. Instead, the

infinite uniqueness of these circumstances is itself the subject of study, the acceptance of which provides the imperative for a meaningful engagement with past world-views.

We may think here of a single Viking-Age example, an excerpt from the well-known account of an Arab traveller, Ibn Rustah, who met a group of Scandinavians in Russia sometime after 922:

When a leading man among them dies, they dig a grave like a big house and put him inside it. With him they put his clothes and the gold bracelets he wore and also much food and drinking vessels and coins. They also put the woman that he loved in the grave with him, while she is still living. And so the entrance to the grave is stopped up, and she dies there.

Translation by Foote & Wilson 1980: 412, with my amendments; original text (not given here) after Jakubovskij 1926

He is describing a chamber grave, of a kind very familiar from both written sources and archaeology. The medieval sagas contain a great many references to live burial and sacrifice, which have been comprehensively summarised by Ellis (1943: 5–8), and the same phenomenon is mentioned in other first-hand Arab sources, such as those by Ibn Miskaweih (Arne 1932a: 216) and of course Ibn Fadlan. The account that the latter writer left of his journey to the Volga Bulghars in 921–2 will be taken up several times in these pages (I have returned to Ibn Fadlan on many occasions, *e.g.* Price 1998a, 2008a, 2010a, 2012, 2014b).

The reality of the sacrificial descriptions is proven by archaeological finds of several graves with more than one body, in circumstances that suggest either a live burial of this sort or a ritual killing, for example at Bollstanäs in Uppland (Hemmendorf 1984) and grave A129 at Birka (Holmquist Olausson 1990), and of course the Oseberg burial (Christensen *et al.* 1992). Women have also been found as apparent sacrifices in several chamber-graves of male Scandinavian warriors at Černigov in the Ukraine (Arne 1931: 286), and there is considerable discussion of a possible live burial of a woman in graves Bj. 516/632 at Birka (Arbman 1937: 244–7 & 1939: 77; Gräslund 1980: 36; see also Engdahl 1990: 26f for an overall survey of sacrificial burials).

This is a perfect illustration of the ‘different’ Viking world that I referred to at the start of this chapter, and of Chippindale’s ‘oddness’. We must picture

here a couple, living their lives in much the same way as everyone else: the social round of family, friends and acquaintances; the everyday interactions of trade and exchange; all the activities of the domestic and 'professional' sphere. And yet when the man of the household dies, his partner – known to all the community in the network of relationships just mentioned – is buried alive in the chamber with his corpse. We can perhaps imagine the feelings of the woman, though we should not be too sure of this. It is hard enough to conjure up the level of horror that we would feel today before such an event, but harder still to envisage a situation where that emotion may *not* have been paramount. In the accounts of both Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Miskaweih, it is stressed that the slaves volunteer for this death; whether this was actually the case or a matter of convention is harder to discern (we can also consider the ethnographically-documented examples of mortuary suicide from more recent centuries). And how did the onlookers feel, watching this ritual entombment and then walking away, going home or to some continued funeral ceremony, or passing the sealed mound in the subsequent hours and days? How did they articulate the knowledge that inside that grave a woman they knew was slowly suffocating, dying in the dark beside the rotting body of her partner, and that one day the same fate might be theirs? To us this seems unthinkable, and yet to at least some of the people of the Viking Age, at an institutionalised and socially-sanctioned level, it clearly was not. Why? What does this tell us about them, and in this how far can we trust the judgement of a thousand years of hindsight?

For Chippindale in his Australian work and myself in my contacts with the Sámi, this subtle adjustment of perception arises most clearly in encounters with indigenous peoples, and – with their permission – what we bring from those meetings to help us in other archaeological situations. In essence, this concerns a confrontation with difference in an empirical context. For me, one of the benefits of working in Sápmi is that I often feel intellectually *un*comfortable there, and I find this to be a decidely healthy experience. However, this does not turn those who live there into an artificial Other that can be domesticated by inclusion in my own 'academic' discourse, on the printed page or in the lecture-room. We have come back to the relevance of archaeological theory, the maturity of which can only be assessed in relation to its application (cf. Gräslund 1989: 47).

For our understanding of the Viking Age, as I have argued repeatedly elsewhere (Price 1998a & b, 2000a–c, 2002, 2004a, 2005d, 2008b, 2010b and others), I believe it is crucial to take the Sámi into account on equal terms to their Nordic neighbours. For our *perspectives* on the Viking Age, I believe it is also crucial to incorporate the theoretical lessons of indigenous archaeologies of which the Sámi are a part. The way in which I play this out will become apparent in the following chapters, as I present and interpret evidence from archaeological finds and written sources, but I can conclude this introduction with a summary of the path that leads there.

An archaeology of the Viking mind?

We begin in chapter 2, with a short survey of Norse mythology and an overview of the approaches that have been taken to its study. The different paths adopted by philologists and historians of religions are compared, drawing out the main paradigms for the interpretation of Viking-Age spirituality. The character of this 'religion' is then considered, examining its relationship to concepts of worship, ritual and superstition. An emphasis is placed on the broader world of supernatural beings, beyond the gods themselves, and this 'invisible population' is then introduced in some detail. From the other world we then move to our own reality, and examine the physical forms taken by religion in the societies of Viking-Age Scandinavia. Here we look at cult places, the ritual landscape and the various kinds of 'cultic officiaries' who seem to have presided over these rituals.

Having established a platform of general synthesis for the more formalised religion of the Viking Age, the discussion then turns to the book's primary subject of sorcery. The connections between 'magic' and 'religion' are reviewed in the context of definition and meaning. It is argued that sorcery was in many ways interlinked with the larger framework of humanity's relations with the gods and their servants, while still retaining an independent base in an unfocused structure of popular belief. The main complex of Old Norse sorcery – known as *seiðr* – is then introduced, and discussed in the context of other forms of magic including *galdr*, *gandr* and the supernatural skills of Óðinn. Against the background of *seiðr* as a generic for Nordic sorcery, the chapter concludes with a full review of the written sources in which it appears, and a history of academic research in this field.

Chapters 3 to 5 form the core of the book, presenting an escalating scale of analysis that begins with the Viking-Age Scandinavians, moves to the Sámi, and finally takes us to the level of the circumpolar cultures. Chapter three focuses on *seiðr*, and begins with an exploration of sorcery in relation to Óðinn, Freyja and the Vanir, and Norse cosmology. Having examined magic among the immortals, we shall then turn to its human practitioners and review the evidence for the different types of ritual specialist operating in Viking-Age Scandinavia. Moving on from the written sources, the extensive archaeological material relating to the burials of probable sorcerers will be discussed. The performers lead us to the performance, and the physical parameters of *seiðr* will then be considered in depth as we look at the ritual architecture, equipment and props used in the practice of sorcery.

We will then explore the gender constructions with which *seiðr* was encoded, the different roles sanctioned for men and women, and the apparent development of new forms of socio-sexual identity in connection with the rituals. It will also be argued that in many ways these rites can be seen as fundamentally sexual in nature, not merely symbolically but also literally in the manner of their performance. Part of this involves an intricate system of relations that were believed to exist between human beings and the inhabitants of other worlds, and a discussion of helping spirits in *seiðr* therefore follows next. Chapter three concludes with a review of the 'domestic' functions of Nordic sorcery, as a background for the more developed set of aggressive rituals that I argue formed the core of the *seiðr* complex and which are presented later.

At first, my account of the rituals and practices of the Scandinavians may seem an outlandish over-interpretation, and – especially to archaeologists specialising in the period – without place in the established models that we have built up for our understanding of Viking-Age society. However, chapter four will demonstrate that very similar behavioural trends and patterns of belief can be traced among the Sámi, the Nordic population's contemporary neighbours in the Scandinavian peninsula: the ritual world of the Viking-Age North becomes more nuanced and complex.

Chapter 4 begins by examining the history of research into connections between *seiðr* and its nearest equivalent among the Sámi, known as *noaidevuohta*. This is then expanded into a consideration of Sámi relations

with the Norse population in the Viking Age. Again, an overview of Sámi religion is presented, looking at the world of the gods, conceptions of spirit-beings, and the complex of Sámi soul beliefs. The institution of *noaidevuohta* is examined in detail with a focus on the *noaidi*, the Sámi ritual specialist who played a central role in all communal and spiritual life. As with the Nordic material, we shall concentrate on building up a terminology of practice and practitioners to which the other sources can then be related. A detailed section then considers the role of women in *noaidevuohta*, before examining the rituals associated with this form of sorcery. The archaeological material is reviewed, including the *noaidi*'s equipment and dress, and the single example of a possible *noaidi* burial from the early medieval period. As with *seiðr*, the sexual overtones of the rituals are explored, together with the elements of offensive and defensive magic that are also present. As the functions of *noaidevuohta* are summarised, the chapter concludes by setting these practices in their pan-Scandinavian context, and in comparison with the Nordic sorcery set out previously.

When we proceed in chapter 5 to the broader cultural context of which the Sámi are a part, that of the circumpolar region, we will find that none of the religious practices hitherto discussed appear at all unusual against this background. Chapter five focuses primarily on the concept of shamanism, which is introduced from the early Siberian ethnographies and followed through the subsequent centuries of anthropological debate. A range of definitions and perspectives are considered, and the components of the 'shamanic world-view' are discussed in detail: cosmology, the ensouled environment, the shamanic vocation, special constructions of gender and sexuality, and the role of aggression in shamanic ritual. From this we proceed to a subject which has been alluded to in the preceding chapters, the interpretation of pre-Christian Nordic belief in the context of shamanism. These perspectives too are charted in the history of research, focusing on the archaeology of Scandinavia from the Mesolithic to the early Iron Age. The work on *seiðr* in the centuries before the Viking Age is considered, followed by a detailed review of Viking-Age magic in the context of circumpolar spirituality. The picture painted of Viking sorcery then emerges as essentially what we ought to expect in the socio-geographical circumstances of early medieval Scandinavia, and in fact the *absence* of such phenomena would

actually be far more remarkable than the oddities of their conventions as they appear to us.

In chapter 6 we return to the Scandinavians, and begin to assess how these complexes of ritual, sorcery, witchcraft and magic could have fitted within the wider social structure of the time: what did they mean, how were they used, whom and what did they serve? It is here that we introduce the concept of *seiðr* as war sorcery, beginning with an overview of aggressive functions that it performs in the written sources. From this we shall move to the intervention of different supernatural agencies on the battlefield, either in parallel with human spell-working or as a result of it. The *valkyrjur* are considered at length here, with further discussion of other beings of destruction. From this follows an analysis of Nordic battle magic for both warriors and sorcerers.

At this point we shall shift our attention from the ritual battlefield to the physical one, and examine the operation of supernatural concepts in the actual fighting. The shifting of shape will be considered here in relation to *seiðr*, and explored through the activities of Óðinnic animal-warriors such as the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*. These phenomena are then analysed in terms of the psychological dynamics of mass violence, and the concept of sacred battle-rage. The chapter finishes by bringing together the ritual and physical aspects of combat, which are summarised and worked into a coherent whole in what was originally the concluding chapter 7. The ‘Viking Way’ of the title is reviewed in retrospect, and expanded upon with hindsight, in the new chapter 8 on magic and mind added for this second edition.

To begin this project, however, we must start with the religion of the Norse.

2

Problems and paradigms in the study of Old Norse sorcery

A mythology is the comment of … one particular age or civilisation on the mysteries of human existence and the human mind, their model for social behaviour, and their attempt to define in stories … their perception of the inner realities.

Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (1964: 9)

Entering the mythology

When we think of 'religion' in pre-Christian Scandinavia, or read about it in our syntheses of the Viking Age, a number of familiar elements are always present. Our knowledge of this mythology is primarily based on a small number of written sources – the poems of the elder *Edda* and Snorri's prose expositions in *Gylfaginning*, hints in skaldic poetry and the sagas – but this is backed up with contemporary narrative art from archaeological contexts, and the excavated detritus of everyday belief.

The outline of the Viking myth cycle is well-known, but worth reviewing to draw out points of relevance for the present discussion.

Some aspects of it belong to a level of over-arching scheme and cosmological order, such as the creation story which begins with Ginnungagap, the 'yawning void' filled with magical powers. The tales are sometimes contradictory, but Snorri tells us of two realms of ice and fire, Niflheimr and Muspell. Eleven or twelve rivers, named in the *Grímnismál*, flow out from these places into the emptiness, mixing and condensing in the mist. Perhaps the giant Ymir is born from this, or perhaps he was already there; in some

ways the giants seem to predate it all. The great cow, Auðhumla ‘the hornless one rich in milk’, appears also at this time. Her milk provides food for Ymir, but she also licks the salty rime that has formed in the void. Under her tongue the first god slowly emerges from the ice. Somehow this being, Búri, produces a son, from whose union with a giantess comes the first of the Æsir. Óðinn has been born. Together with his brothers Víli and Vé he turns on Ymir and kills him, and then they begin to create the earth from his flesh. The seas come from his blood, the bowl of the heavens from his empty skull. *Grímnismál* says that the clouds were fashioned from his brain. Ymir’s hair becomes the trees, from two of which the gods shape the first humans, Askr and Embla.

At this time the worlds are also formed, but their number is unclear – at least nine levels of the underworld and possibly more, with a shadowy image of other realms in tiers above the sky (though this is probably a later addition following the Christian concept of heaven). There may have been others still, such as the water-world mentioned in two of the Eddic poems.

The sources also mention the coming of the divine families, the Æsir joined by the Vanir who seem to be somehow older, from an earthier, more fertile tradition. The realm of the gods is split by civil war, until the families join their forces.

They lived in Ásgarðr, a broad landscape dotted with buildings and fields. Óðinn resided in Valholl, the ‘hall of the slain’ with its roof thatched with shields, resting on rafters of spears. Each god and goddess had a magnificent homestead, shining with silver, gold and other ornament, set on its own land. The abode of humans was nearby in Miðgarðr, the ‘middle place’ connected to the home of the gods by Bifrost, the bridge of the rainbow. The dispersed settlement pattern of the gods in Ásgarðr duplicated and enhanced that of humans in this world. Beneath Miðgarðr, the many halls of the dead stretched down into the earth to Niflhel, nine leagues deep. In the east was Útgarðr, the home of demonic powers, trolls and other horrors. To the north was Jotunheimr, ‘Giant-Land’. Sometimes this place appears in the plural, so the primordial giants may also have had several worlds to dwell in.



Fig. 2.1 An animal with 'tree-antlers' depicted on a Viking Age wall-hanging (weave II) from Överhogdal in Härjedalen. This may be one of the four stags that graze in the branches of Yggdrasill, the World Tree (photographer unknown, Creative Commons).

Connecting them all was the ash Yggdrasill, the 'World Tree' (Fig. 2.1). We know of the creatures that lived on its trunk – the eagle at the top, the dragon underneath, and the squirrel that ran from one to the other carrying insults. Four harts grazed on the boughs, but Yggdrasill was refreshed daily from the well that lay under its roots. The latter stretched into every world, providing a hazardous route for travelers between them.

Other myths concern the inhabitants of these places, and their servants – the gods and goddesses, of course, but also the *valkyrjur*, *nornir* and other supernatural beings. They are surrounded by animals, each with its own special place in the cosmological scheme: cockerels, snakes and deer, goats, cats, hawks and ravens, wolves and dogs. At another level still we find the darker forces in the shadows of the Viking belief system – ambiguous subterranean creatures like the dwarfs and elves. Here too is the trickster Loki and his children, the wolf Fenrir, the 'World Serpent' Miðgarðsormr (or Jormungandr – it has several names), and Hel who had custody of the anonymous dead.

The majority of the myths relate the stories that weave them all together: the many conflicts with the giants, some comic, some brutally violent; the

skilful cunning of the dwarfs and their commissions from Ásgarðr; the gods' marvellous transportation – their horses, including Óðinn's eight-legged steed Sleipnir, Freyr's collapsible ship, the chariots of Þórr and Freyja; the theft and recovery of Molnir, Þórr's hammer; Loki's treachery and shape-changing; the fettering of Fenrir and the loss of Týr's hand; Freyr giving his sword to Skírnir; the erotic tales of Óðinn's seductions and Freyja's many infidelities; Þórr fishing for the World Serpent; the stealing of Iðunn's apples; and many, many more. At the centre of them run Óðinn's quests for wisdom, and the awful predictions he receives of the end of all things. From these stem the death of Baldr, the flyting of Loki and his subsequent capture to be bound in the entrails of his son, all the long preparations for the last conflict.

This is one of the most crucial aspects of Norse mythology for any understanding of the Viking world-view. The end is always the same: the final battle at the Ragnarok, the 'doom of the gods' and the terrible things that will be unleashed to fight it (Fig. 2.2). In the words of *Voluspá*, the 'Seeress's Prophecy' that we shall consider extensively below, it begins with a time of fear:

skeggold, skálmold	an axe age, a sword age
– skildir ro klofnir –	– shields are riven –
vindold, vargold –	a wind age, a wolf age –
áðr verold steypiz.	before the world goes headlong.

Voluspá 44; translation after Dronke 1997: 19

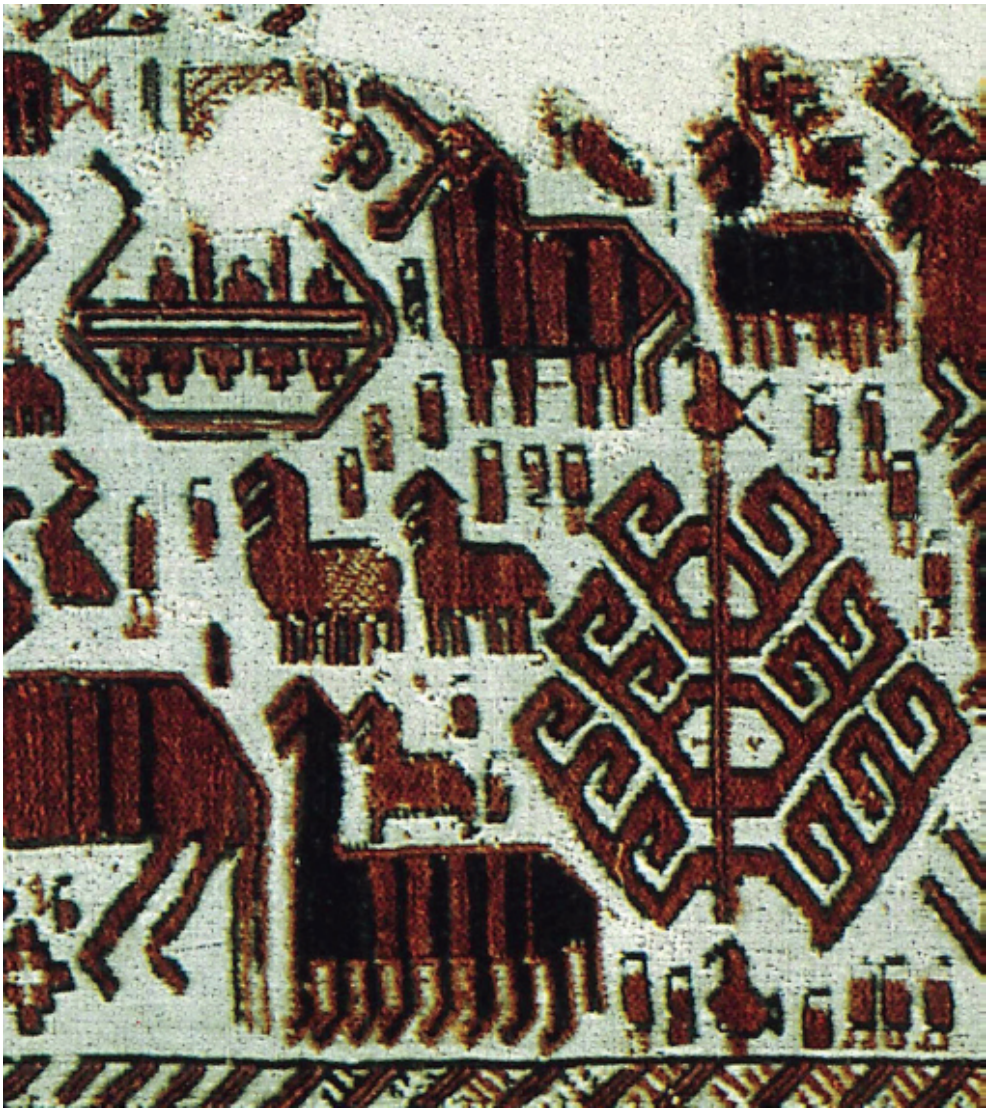


Fig. 2.2 A scene from weave Ia from Överhogdal, possibly depicting events from the Ragnarok. At the bottom may be the World Tree Yggdrasill, with above it the wolf Fenrir opening his jaws. In front of Fenrir may be Naglfar, the 'Nail Ship' bringing the dead to the last battle (photographer unknown, Creative Commons).

Three years of war will first shake the earth, followed by the *fimbulvetr*, a period of three winters with no summers between. The bonds of kinship, the social cement which held the Vikings' world together, begin to dissolve: brothers kill brothers, cousins sleep with cousins, families are destroyed in the worst nightmare that the Norse mind could conceive.

Then the cataclysms begin, as the earth shakes, the trees and mountains fall, and Yggdrasill itself shivers. All bonds are broken, Loki is released and Fenrir runs free. Great wolves race across the sky: Skoll swallows the sun, while his companion Hati attacks the moon. The land begins to sink beneath the sea, whipped to a froth by the World Serpent as it writhes its way out of the waters and onto Vígríðr, the plain of battle.

In Ásgarðr the cockerel Gullinkambi, ‘Golden Comb’, is rousing the gods. Watching for danger at the head of the Bifrost bridge, Heimdallr blows his horn. Now is the time for Óðinn to take counsel with the oracles that he has been collecting against this day. He talks to the severed head of Mímr the sage, and is told what the future holds. Like him, every being in all the various worlds knows their fated role, that they will fall at the last, as the cosmos disintegrates around them.

Roosters are also crowing among the dead and in the realm of the giants. The armies of Hel march back from the grave. Fenrir’s many children are let loose from Járnviðr, the ‘Iron Wood’ in the east where the troll-women have bred them. The trolls’ shepherd, Eggþér the giant, sits on his burial mound and plays his harp, smiling to himself as the end that he has waited for at last arrives. The dwarfs are also awakened, and start to howl outside the rocky doors of their halls under the mountains. The elves too are on the move. Every giant of fire and frost, all the trolls and underground things, all hasten to the Ragnarok to fight out their age-old enmity with the gods.

Breaking loose from its moorings on the seabed, with Loki at its helm, we find surely the most terrible vessel from any mythology – Naglfar, ‘Nail-Ship’, made from the fingernails of the dead and crewed by all those who have ever drowned. We can picture a longship vast beyond imagining, muddy and rotten with weed, salt water pouring off its decks as it breaks the surface after the long rise from the bottom. As its cargo Naglfar brings the hosts of destruction to their appointed places.

Everyone is making for Vígríðr, where the battle will be joined. The armies of evil are championed by Surtr the fire giant, with his sword that is brighter than the sun. Leading the sons of Muspell he rides through a hole that they have ripped in the sky. Flames dance on every side as they cross over the rainbow, the Bifrost bridge, which cracks and collapses behind them. At the same time Fenrir bounds onto the plain, his lower jaw touching the ground

while his upper jaw stretches to scrape the heavens. Fire springs from his eyes and beside him the Miðgarðsormr spits poison over the earth.

Óðinn mobilises his troops, puts on his golden helmet, and then leads the Æsir and Vanir to war. According to the *Grímnismál*, from each of Valholl's five hundred and forty doors stride eight hundred warriors, each of whom once died valiantly in Miðgarðr and was rewarded with a place in Óðinn's hall. An equal number have dwelt with Freyja in Sessrumnir, her hall on Fólkvangr in another part of Ásgarðr. In all, eight hundred and sixty-four thousand warriors will now fight for the gods, earning the hospitality that they have received. The number may be even greater because the Norse did not use the decimal system, and their 'hundred' was probably a hundred and twenty. This would mean that the gods have 1,228,800 troops at their disposal.

Against them stands the great mass of the ordinary dead, risen from their beds in Hel under Loki's command. The frost giants are there with Hrymr at their head – they also arrived in Naglfar. The fire giants from Muspell are drawn up separately in a great battle array: "it will be very bright", says Snorri. The plain of Vígríðr stretches a hundred leagues in every direction, and it is entirely covered with the armies gathered to fight at the Ragnarok.

When the battle is finally joined, the gods themselves are in the thick of it. Each of them is matched against a creature of the underworld. As he rides from Valholl, Óðinn makes directly for the wolf, Fenrir. Þórr tries to help him, but soon has his hands full as the Miðgarðsormr attacks. Around them, all across the plain, millions are fighting. The human dead of every kind are locked in combat, as is every other being from all the worlds.

As the killing wears on and on, the mortals fall again, meeting a second and final death. The same fate waits for all the other creatures, those who have dwelt in stones and deep in the forests, in water and fire, in the ice and in the air. Even the gods are dying. Many opponents slay each other in the duels taking place around the field – Týr and the hell-hound Garmr, Heimdallr and Loki. Þórr smashes the World Serpent with his hammer, but with a dying spasm it covers him with a fatal spray of venom. Even Óðinn does not escape his fate: he snags his foot in Fenrir's jaws, and the lord of the gods is gulped down and eaten. Víðarr avenges his father by ripping the wolf apart. Surtr kills Freyr, helpless without his sword, and then lights the final fire that will consume all the realms.

The Norse world ends not with a whimper, but with a very big bang indeed. All the gods, all the giants, trolls and other monsters, all the mortals and every other living thing lie dead – either upon the field of Vígríðr or elsewhere. Nothing is mentioned of the goddesses and the human women who have presumably stayed behind while their menfolk fight, but perhaps they have remained in their homes. Wherever they are, they do not escape. All the great halls of the gods are burning, and the houses of every realm wither to ash in Surtr's self-immolating fire. The stars fall into the sea, their heat turning the waters into a steaming mist that covers what remains of the world. Flames touch the sky and consume the heavens, and all of creation melts back into the void. Everything everywhere spins down to destruction, towards what has always been inevitable, the only possible end.

Under Christian influence, a myth of rebirth seems to have been added to the Ragnarok story as we see it in the closing strophes of *Voluspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. The earth rises again from the sea, and a son of Óðinn returns from the dead to find golden chess pieces sparkling in the green grass. Corn grows in the fields without being sown, and a hall for heroes stands on the plain: "there shall the worthy/ warrior bands dwell/and all their days of life/enjoy delight" (*Voluspá* 61, in Dronke's 1997 translation). There is little to suggest that this was an original part of the Norse belief system, and its contradictions are clumsily unresolved – how can there be any "worthy warrior bands", if everyone is dead? In the eleventh century or later it was probably added to the cycle of tales on which the composer of *Voluspá* drew.

We are left with a sobering conclusion, which is that the Vikings created one of the few known world mythologies to include the pre-ordained and permanent ruin of all creation and all the powers that shaped it, with no lasting afterlife for anyone at all. The cosmos began in the frozen emptiness of Ginnungagap, and will end in fire with the last battle. Everything will burn at the Ragnarok, whatever gods and humans may do. The outcome of our actions, our fate, is already decided and therefore does not matter. What is important is the manner of our conduct as we go to meet it.

The psychological implications of this and other aspects of the Norse 'religion' bear thinking about.

Research perspectives on Scandinavian pre-Christian religion

The mythological summary above draws on many sources. The *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda* have already been mentioned, while overviews can be found in Davidson (1964) and other texts taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters, including contentious points of interpretation. There are many guides and syntheses, but see Larrington (2017) for the latest scholarly overview, with an interesting alternative in Kure (2010); differing views of the Ragnarok can be found in Gunnell & Lassen (2013) and Hultgård (2017).

Research into these myth cycles of the Norse has been continuous since the beginnings of Viking studies, and has affected every perception of the Nordic past. In 1997 David Wilson explored the fascination that early medieval Scandinavia has exerted over the artistic imagination from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, and it was no accident that he chose as his title the double-emphasis of *Vikings and Gods in European Art*. A preoccupation for the mythologies of the North, and their extraordinary cast of supernatural characters, can be traced in every Western country (for an overview of this process, see Mjöberg 1980; Roesdahl & Meulengracht Sørensen 1996; Raudvere *et al.* 2001, 2005; Arvidsson 2007; O'Donoghue 2010; Jón Karl Helgason 2017). Óðinn, Þórr and the rest have been seen as everything from archetypes of Victorian values (Wawn 2000) to ideal subjects for more modern narrative media such as adventure novels, movies and comic books (Djupdræt 1998 for Danish work; Garrec's 1996 exhibition catalogue for the French popular reception of the Vikings; Ward 2000 and Barnes 2001 on North American responses).

Within the academic sphere we can trace the study of Viking-Age religion along two parallel streams. One of these runs naturally within the discipline of history of religions, and the other within the equally important mainstream of Old Norse philology and saga studies which provides so much of the primary data. A detailed overview of this field would be inappropriate to the present work, but as background to a history of research for Nordic sorcery we can make a few general observations.

Philology and comparative theology

The question of source criticism has of course been central to this discussion from the beginning, especially concerning the reliability of the medieval Icelandic texts as evidence for the Viking Age that they describe. Until at least the midnineteenth century they were regarded as essentially true relations of

the Nordic past, a literary counterpart to the great archaeological discoveries that were then being made in Scandinavia (Mjöberg 1980: 225–30). As the sagas began to appear in critical editions, chiefly under the editorship of Icelandic philologists, the discussion on their dating, origin and integrity also expanded. From the 1850s onwards the veracity of the sagas came under ever more intense scrutiny, with early contributions to the debate made by scholars such as Keyser (1866), Maurer (1869) and Heusler (1914), and later Liestøl (1929). By the time that Dag Strömbäck wrote his thesis in 1935, he could summarise a polarised situation where on the one hand the sagas were regarded as faithful oral histories preserved essentially intact since the Viking Age, and on the other dismissed as hopelessly compromised products of the medieval imagination.

As the historical view of saga research was gradually eclipsed by the source-critical approach, by the 1950s the sagas had come to be seen almost exclusively as literary constructs, analysed as to form, motif and composition in a similar manner to the medieval European Romance tradition. It is within this field that the majority of research on Old Norse prose has been undertaken in the last half-century.

From the early 1980s onwards, however, a new paradigm began to emerge in saga research in the form of a combined historical-literary approach. Influenced by the French *Annales* school discussed in chapter 1, a new generation of researchers began to explore the sagas in terms of the cognitive environments of their creation. Thus instead of seeking Viking-Age *mentalités*, the texts were seen as reflections of the world-views current in the thirteenth century and later, the Iceland of the Sturlungas in which scholar-politicians like Snorri played such a prominent role. Researchers such as Byock (1982, 1988, 2001), Hastrup (1985, 1998) and Miller (1990) have played a prominent part in this movement, alongside leading exponents from the ‘source-critical school’. Of the latter, Clunies Ross has probably made the most extensive contribution with her two-volume study *Prolonged Echoes* (1994, 1998a), which is taken up in chapter 3 alongside the work of another important historical-literary scholar, the late Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (*e.g.* 1983, 2000). The discussion on the sagas as sources for the Viking Age continues, needless to say, and Strömbäck’s observation that “it is now more perilous than

ever to adopt a fixed and consistent position" (1935: 4) remains just as true today – especially for an archaeologist looking at textual material.

Parallel with the philological debate, and to some extent dependent upon it, was the interpretation of the Old Norse texts as source material for the specific study of religion. Here too, it is possible to trace a changing pattern of analysis over the last two hundred years. We shall examine specific works in detail below in considering research on Nordic sorcery, but we can briefly review some of the main trends here. Comparative theology also had its 'historical school', though its effects lasted a little longer. This was the same paradigm as that pursued in archaeology by Nerman and Lindqvist, as discussed in chapter 1. Here we see the same intensification of source-critical approaches, leading to a similar emphasis on the unreliability of the texts as evidence for Old Norse belief. As with mainstream saga studies, historians of religion also moved into a phase of literary-philological critique, which gathered momentum in the 1960s. Especially critical of the later medieval sources, this work focused on the creation of explanatory models.

Developing partly in phase with the literary critics, another school of comparative study took shape, which sought cross-cultural parallels for the components of ancient Scandinavian belief. Much of this work focused around the ideas of Georges Dumézil who placed greater reliance on Snorri than many of his contemporaries (see especially 1939, 1959 and the posthumous collection of essays from 2000). Dumézil's influence has not declined, though some of the interpretations that are most central for his work are not generally supported today. These include his famous tripartite division of Indo-European religious culture, which has long been rejected in a Scandinavian context. In applying structuralism to religion, Dumézil and his followers like Folke Ström, E. O. G. Turville-Petre and, for a time, Bruce Lincoln pioneered an approach that is still relevant today, and has led to a number of separate avenues of enquiry.

The detail of much of this work will be considered below, but before turning to the specific questions of Nordic sorcery, we need to seek general patterns of consensus as to the nature of pre-Christian religion in the North – how was it organised, by and for whom was it operating? Although they do not form the primary focus of this book, these structures serve as a vital background against which the complex of sorcery can be considered.

Gods and monsters, worship and superstition

Religion and belief

The first observation we must make is that, beyond the convenience of disciplinary terminology, very few scholars still speak of Nordic 'religion' at all. In chapter one we encountered the notion of a 'belief system', perhaps a better term as it sets spirituality where it belongs alongside everything else that the Norse thought about, mixed together with every other aspect of their lives both sacred and profane.

Still, the notion of a *system* of any kind is misleading here. At present we in fact know very little about the detailed practice of Old Norse religion, but it is symptomatic that we conceptualise it as 'pagan', which both in English and the Scandinavian languages (*hedendom* etc) is taken to mean any set of rites and ceremonies deemed non-Christian in inspiration. Interestingly, we are by no means sure exactly what a northern European Christian would have thought and believed in the eighth to eleventh centuries. By formulating our ideas on early Norse religion by reference to that which it was not – Christianity – we are missing an essential point. It is problematic to apply what is effectively a monotheistic framework of interpretation to a whole pantheon of gods, and this also ignores the whole host of other supernatural entities that were at least as important as the Æsir and Vanir. Viking 'paganism' was probably never a consistent orthodoxy such as writers like Snorri tried to present, and may never have been systematically understood by those who practised it.

This applies not least to the inhabitants of Ásgarðr, and their relationship with human beings. In the same spirit as Philip Vellacott's description of the gods of classical Greece (1973: 30f), the 'worship' required by the Norse pantheon was not adoration, or gratitude, or even unreserved approval, and was thus utterly unlike the Christian relationship to the divine. The religion of the Æsir and Vanir demanded only a recognition that they existed as an integral and immutable part of human nature and society, and of the natural world, and that as such they possessed an inherent rightness – perhaps even a kind of beauty. If one wished to avoid disaster, it was necessary to come to terms with the gods, and the terms would be theirs, not those of their followers. This is an important point in relation to the interpretations that I will develop in the following chapters, because a refusal to acknowledge the gods in this way could have dire consequences. It would also involve a contradiction, as such an

act would be a denial of the undeniable. The question of ‘believing in’ the Norse gods was probably irrelevant.

In fact it is clear that their mythology was far from static, and changed both regionally and over time. It was influenced by Christianity, in different ways at different periods, and in different places. It may have been peripherally affected by Islam, and closer to home by the more familiar religions of the Sámi. The Vikings also encountered the spiritual beliefs of the Balts and Slavs, and the nomadic peoples of the western Asian steppe. In the west they met the indigenous inhabitants of Greenland and Canada’s eastern seaboard, though it is doubtful that any of their beliefs were absorbed.

All this is particularly visible in the archaeology, both in the material culture of spiritual belief – amulets, charms and so on – and in the evidence of mortuary behaviour. On the basis of burial ritual alone, we see variation not just on a regional scale but almost from one community to the next, expressed in differing opinions of what was the proper way to send the dead from this world to another. Not least, the ceremonies for the departed were the concern of the living, and may be in part read as such – with an eye for status, conspicuous consumption and a signalling of allegiance or politics. This is, of course, an old and familiar debate in archaeological circles (see Parker Pearson 1999 and Tarlow & Nilsson Stutz 2013 for overviews; Price 2008c for the Viking Age).

In sorting out this mass of perspectives, an essential first step is to ask exactly what kinds of supernatural beings we are dealing with. We also need to understand the balance between the ‘worship’ of the gods, in the sense described above, and other scales of relationship with the supernatural. Discussions of Norse religion tend to focus on the higher beings such as the Æsir and Vanir, but this overlooks a much broader range of creatures that may in fact have been more important to ordinary people. Some of these have a central role to play in the system of sorcery with which this book is concerned, and we may briefly review them here.

The invisible population

Beyond the gods themselves, what we might call the ‘invisible population’ of Scandinavia can be classified in six broad groups: servants of the gods beings of cosmological purpose giants supernatural beings of nature ‘spirits’

- projections of the human soul We can examine them in turn.

Servants of the gods

Firstly, many of the gods have ‘servants’ in the form of animals, often working for them as beasts of burden, steeds or in pulling their various vehicles. To some extent they also seem to symbolise the respective gods, and were the animals of choice for their sacrifices. Some of these are discussed in more detail in the following chapters, and all are described by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*; the animals that appear in the Eddic poems are interestingly discussed by von Hofsten (1957).

- Óðinn’s ravens, Huginn (‘Mind’) and Muninn (‘Memory’) Óðinn’s wolves,
- Freki and Geri (both meaning ‘Greedy One’) Óðinn’s eight-legged horse,
- Sleipnir (‘Sliding One’) Þórr’s goats, Tanngrísnir (‘Snarl-Tooth’) and
- Tanngnóstr (‘Gnash-Tooth’) Freyja’s un-named cats Freyja’s boar,
- Hildisvíni (‘Battle-Swine’) Freyr’s boar, Gullinborsti (‘Golden-Bristles’) Heimdallr’s ram? (the god may simply be associated with this animal) Besides these we find one category of being directly connected with the gods, and with Óðinn in particular – the valkyries. Acting as ‘choosers of the slain’ and bringing the valiant dead to Valholl, the valkyries thereafter wait on them, carrying mead to their benches. They are discussed at length in chapter 6, but see Boyer (2014) for an overview.

- *valkyrjur*, ‘valkyries’

Beings of cosmological purpose

Beyond the named characters who generically belong to the different types of beings listed in the rest of this section, the Norse mythos contains a very great number of individual creatures with a specific place in the cosmos. Examples here include the various animals that live on and around the World Tree, the cockerels that act as guardians in the different realms, and so on. Common to them all is that they play little or no part in anything outside their precise function. While some of them are discussed later in the book, the majority will not be treated further here (an overview of these beings may be found in any of the general syntheses on Norse religion).

Three exceptions to this are the *nornir* who live in a shining hall by the roots of Yggdrasill (Halvorsen 1967b; Bek-Pedersen 2011). They water the

tormented tree every day and coat its trunk with clay from the spring of knowledge. In *Voluspá* 20 the three maidens are named:

Urð héto eina,	Urðr [‘Had to be’] they called one,
aðra Verðandi	the second Verðandi [‘Coming to be’]
– skáro á skíði –	– they incised the slip of wood –
Skuld ena þriðio.	Skuld [‘Has to be’] the third.
Þær log logðo,	They laid down laws,
þær líf kuro	they chose out lives
alda bornum,	for mankind’s children,
ørlog seggia.	men’s destinies.

Voluspá 20; translation after Dronke 1997: 12

As embodiments of Past, Present and Future, the names of the *nornir* include an edge of necessity that alludes to their function as the mistresses of fate. Here they use wooden lots to decide human futures, though other sources describe them weaving a cloth for each life, in which every strand represented an event or moment – a great fabric of an individual’s fate, finished by the cutting of the final thread (though see Bek-Pedersen 2006 for a critical review of this material). Their fingernails each bear a rune. In addition to the three principal beings of this kind, Snorri mentions that many more *nornir* exist, both good and evil. These are described in *Gylfaginning* 15 as being of three different ancestries, descending from the Æsir, elves and dwarfs. As we shall see in chapter 6, the *nornir* share several characteristics with the *valkyrjur* and *dísir* (see Ström 1954).

- *nornir*, ‘norns’

The giants

Alongside the gods, probably the most important mythological beings were the giants. As we have seen, they play a major role in the Norse cosmogony and in their dealings with Ásgarðr. The giants seem to have been viewed as in some way beings of nature, embodiments of the elements and natural phenomena, and also as representative of all that stood outside the circle of human experience or culture (see Motz 1982 for an overview). It is as this vision of threat personified that they appear in opposition to the gods in the mythological stories. The same picture is revealed by their numerous names

that survive, describing the giants and giantesses as “dirty, hairy, ugly, stupid and especially loud” (Simek 1993: 107; cf. Motz 1981; the names are listed in Orchard 1997: 191–5). The giants are rarely described in detail, though their strength and cunning is a consistent feature. There are, however, some exceptions, as the giants are occasionally learned. At least some of the giantesses are objects of desire for the gods, just as many giants want goddesses as sexual partners (see Clunies Ross 1994: 107–40). They have few dealings with mortals. In several important studies that have partly re-shaped our view of Norse mythology, the historian of religions Gro Steinsland (1986b, 1991) has suggested a cultic role for the giants, and that the frequent sexual alliances between them and the gods represent a constant theme in Nordic kingship, symbolising the unification of different social forces in a sacred marriage. They may also represent other cultures, such as the Sámi, though this would imply a very pejorative view of them on the part of the Norse.

- *jotnar*, ‘giants’

Supernatural beings of nature

The dwarfs were also important beings in the Norse mythos, and frequently appear in the stories of the gods (de Vries 1957: §181; Halvorsen 1958). More than a hundred of their names are recorded in the *þulur* and in the so-called ‘catalogue of dwarfs’ interpolated in *Voluspá* (10–16). They are generally helpful beings, though occasionally devious. The dwarfs are seen as often very wise, and as guardians of knowledge. They are skilled miners and craftworkers, especially in metals, and as in many cultures this transformation of ore into steel takes on a mystical, magical quality in the Norse myths. Many of the gods’ tools, instruments, items of jewellery and vehicles are of dwarfish manufacture. The dwarfs live underground, mostly in mountains, and their ‘apartness’ may again be significant. There is little evidence that they played any part in cultic ceremonies, but they could interact with humans, mostly in a positive way; they may also be referenced in the ritual space of the Icelandic hall (Gunnell 2001). In Snorri, they are seen as a sub-category of elves, *svartálfar* or ‘black elves’. There is little direct evidence as to their appearance, but the modern connotations of small stature inherent in their name were not current in the Viking Age and first appear in the medieval period.

- *dvergar*, ‘dwarfs’

The elves formed a more general category of being, playing little role in the mythos as such (though they do appear occasionally, as in Loki’s accusation that Freyja has slept with every elf in Ásgarðr – *Lokasenna* 30). They appear in many different guises, and often had contact with humans. There is some suggestion of links to Óðinn, and that they were in some way offered to in a similar fashion to the *dísir* (see below). For example, the skaldic poem *Austrfararvísur* by Sigvatr Þórðarson, dating to *c.*1019, mentions an *álfablót* to Óðinn held in a hall, a ceremony over which a woman seems to preside; there are also two saga accounts of such ceremonies (de Vries 1932; 1957: §184). The elves are seen as bringers of good and bad fortune, as omens of luck or doom, as helpers and hinderers, and as bringers of sickness or health. They were also one of the longest-lived elements of pre-Christian beliefs, persisting even today in folklore. Along with the dwarfs, trolls and other similar creatures they have been subsumed into the more general concept of the *huldufólk*, ‘hidden people’, who take many different regional forms and names (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998a: 136–139).

- *álfar*, ‘elves’

On a different level, occurring in the sources in contexts which bring them into contact with ordinary humans, were other giant-like beings of many different kinds. Usually evil or ill-tempered, they are sometimes a manifestation of the undead, and are also occasionally associated with a degree of sexual deviancy. They are described as living in rocks or mountains, in streams and rivers, or generally underground. Collectively the trolls and their kind form the most common type of supernatural creature in the sources (see Hartmann 1936 and Lindow 2014 for comprehensive surveys of these creatures). There are no secure depictions of trolls in late Iron Age material culture (though how could we tell?), but one may perhaps turn to the strange little monsters made of stamped gold that have been found on Bornholm (Laursen & Watt 2011: 9; Kaul 2018).

- *þurs*, ‘ogres’
- *troll*, ‘trolls’

‘Spirits’

Perhaps the broadest, and least defined, category of supernatural being can best be termed ‘spirits’. Again, following their introduction here many of them are discussed in later chapters.

Among the foremost of these were the *dísir* (Ström 1954, 1958; de Vries 1957: §311, 528f). Always female, they seem to have been part deity and part spirit. There are references to sacrificial festivals in their honour, and even special buildings – *dísarsalir* – where these were held (Gunnell 2000). They appear in place-names, including a Dísaþing, and are also occasionally connected with particular gods, especially Óðinn. Poems seem to have been composed as tribute to them. Several of the Eddic poems, such as *Atlamál in grœnlenzko*, strongly imply that the *dísir* were the souls of dead women, serving a function similar to the *valkyrjur*. *Dísir* could also ‘belong’ to a person or their family, and in some saga accounts they appear almost identical to the *fylgjur* discussed below, communicating messages and warnings in dreams (*spádísir*). The element *-dís* is found in compound words in the sense of both ‘goddess’ and ‘woman’, adding further dimensions to these complex beings. The same element is found occasionally in female personal names, sometimes tellingly combined with the names of gods, as in Þórdís and Freydís. In a unique case we also know of a woman called Óðindís, commemorated by the Hassmyra runestone from Västmanland (Vs 24; Gräslund 1995: 462–6). The *dísir* also appear in other variants, including the *landdísir*, who seem to have lived in rocks.

- *dísir landdísir*, ‘land-*dísir*’
- *spádísir*, ‘prophecy-*dísir*’

There were also spirits of the land, the *landvættir*, which appear to have been some kind of guardian beings of place (de Vries 1957: §185; Solheim 1965). They appear occasionally in sagas, and in other medieval sources. They could be aroused to anger by trespass, but could also be frightened away – *Landnámabók* records the Ulfljóts law code that required the figureheads to be removed from ships’ prows when approaching Iceland, so as not to scare the *landvættir*. There may have been some congruence between these spirits and the *landdísir*.

- *landvættir*, ‘land spirits’

Two further types of spiritual beings could be summoned in the course of sorcerous performances, and were known as *gandir* and *verðir* (Tolley 1995a), who may have been subsumed in a general word for such beings, *náttúrur*. Little is known of their form or origin, but they could be employed to provide their summoner with knowledge of the future or distant events, as intermediaries with the dead (the *verðir* in particular may even *be* the spirits of the departed, at least in some form), or as agents of destruction. A crucial element of Old Norse sorcery, these beings are discussed at length in chapter 3.

- *gandir*, ‘spirits’?
- *spágandir*, ‘spirits of prophecy’?
- *verðir*, ‘spirits’?
- *náttúrur*, ‘spirits’?

Other entities served more specific functions, such as *mara*, the Nightmare which ‘rode’ people in their sleep. This terrible creature appears in a number of Old Norse sources, and by comparison with similar spiritual beings it has been very well-studied (Tillhagen 1960, 1966; Raudvere 1991, 1993; see also Ginzburg 1990: ch. 3/2 for a brilliant overview of nightmare traditions in Europe). It is described most often as a threatening dream-creature, sometimes a horse. Occasionally it is the spirit-form of an evil sorcerer, and sometimes an agent of supernatural destruction unleashed upon an enemy. The *mara* was another of the longest-lived of the beings in which the Viking-Age Norse believed, and can be traced far into the post-medieval period. It is discussed below in chapters 3 and 6.

- *mara*, the ‘Nightmare’

Projections of the human soul

In the Viking-Age Norse understanding of reality, human beings also possessed dimensions beyond the physical body. In modern works these have been discussed in terms of soul beliefs, but it is important to emphasise that in many ways these aspects of early medieval Scandinavians were actually separate beings, with their own concerns and their own independent existences

(early overviews are provided in Storm 1893, Blum's 1912 book on protective spirits, and Falk 1926; one of the most comprehensive summaries may be found in Ellis 1943: ch. 5; see also Turville-Petre 1964: 221–30, Strömbäck's 1975 & 1989 essays on Nordic soul beliefs; and Gräslund 1994 for an archaeological analysis of possible earlier archetypes).

One of these human projections was the *fylgja*, literally 'follower' but more often translated 'fetch' (Rieger 1898; Lagerheim 1905; de Vries 1957: §162; Ström 1960; Mundal 1974). These appear either in dreams or to those gifted with powers of second-sight, most often in contexts of warning or as premonitions of doom. Crucially, the *fylgjur* were always female, even those of a man. They could take animal form, though often retaining some human element, especially about the eyes. The word may be related to *fulga*, 'caul' and *fylgja*, 'afterbirth', suggesting that these beings may have been seen as a sort of detached aspect of a human (special beliefs relating to those born with a caul are common throughout Europe, as we shall see in chapter 6). The *fylgjur* could be inherited, and the same individual *fylgjur* were attached to a constant family line. However, they were also independent beings, and could 'reject' a person whom they did not favour. Some *fylgjur* seem to have 'moved on' at a person's death, to lead entirely separate lives. In essence they seem to have been a sort of spirit guardian, perhaps a dead ancestress, protecting an individual with supernatural force. It is interesting that one of the formal grades of concubine in early medieval Iceland was called a *fylgikona* – a 'follower woman' – and her relationship with her patron was called *fylgilag*, but we do not know exactly why (Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001: 109–19). Many Icelanders still believe in the *fylgjur* today, running in families just as before. We shall encounter them several times in the following chapters.

- *fylgjur*, 'fetches', 'followers'

Related to the *fylgjur*, and similarly connected with concepts of destiny, was the *hamingja* (de Vries 1957: §161; Solheim 1961). This was the personified luck of a person, and represented a spirit of good fortune. It was a separate being, and again like the *fylgja* it could be inherited, though it could also be transferred outside a particular family. The motif of a person's luck deserting them or returning recurs in the sagas, and the movements of the *hamingjur* could be seen by those with special powers of perception.

- *hamingjur*, ‘luck-spirits’, ‘guardian-spirits’?

Another aspect of the Viking-Age human personality was the *hamr*, the ‘shape’ (de Vries 1957: §160f; Ström 1961a). The *hamr* was what changed in the course of shape-shifting, linked to the lycanthropic beliefs in werewolves, bear-men and other transformations that we shall consider in chapter 6. As such it seems to have represented the body’s physical form – not just in terms of superficial appearance but as the shell which held all the other aspects inside it. The Old Norse verb for shape-shifting, *skipta homum*, thus conveys something far more fluid and ‘real’ than our modern equivalent, implying the fundamental restructuring of the self. The word *hamr* is also related to *hamingja*, and it is possible that the latter represents an independently mobile form of the ‘shape’. If the *hamr* was destroyed in this separate form, the physical body died at the same time.

- *hamr*, ‘shape’, ‘shell’

To some extent representing aspects of all the above was the *hugr*, a word difficult to translate but probably meaning something rather abstract such as ‘soul’ or even ‘mind’ (de Vries 1957: §160; Solheim 1962). The *hugr* has been described as combining “personhood, thought, wish and desire” (Raudvere 2001: 102). It seems to have represented the essential nature of a human being, and Strömback (1975) argues that it had a kind of aura that others could feel intuitively. Thus in *Volsunga saga* the evil King Atli (*i.e.* Attila the Hun) is described as having an *úlfshugr*, the ‘essence’ of a wolf. The word for a foreboding was *hugboð*, and as with the premonitions that accompany the movements of the *fylgjur* it seems that the *hugr* could visit others to give warning. As we shall see in chapters three and six, when a sorcerer traveled in ethereal form it was both their *hugr* and their *hamr* that were left behind. This may also be reflected in *Voluspá* 18, in the difference between the breath of mortal life that inhabits a body, and the soul which may be renewed (cf. Dronke 1997: 123f).

- *hugr*, ‘*soul*’?, ‘essence’, ‘mind’?

The human dead were also feared as corporeal beings, as Norse revenants were not insubstantial ghosts in the modern sense, but physically reanimated corpses (Klare 1934; Ellis 1943: ch. 6; Turville-Petre 1964: ch. 15; Sayers 1996). They were almost always evil and destructive, regardless of the person's character when alive, and in death had often gained additional powers such as great strength or sorcerous ability. The unquiet dead form a consistent theme in the written descriptions of Viking-Age sorcery, and we will examine a number of examples in the following chapters.

- *draugar*, 'ghosts', the 'undead'
- *aptrgangur*, 'revenants'

Thus far we have reviewed the supernatural inhabitants of the Norse mythology, but how did the people of the Viking Age bridge the gap between their world and that of the others? A brief consideration of the over-arching structure of Norse religion is necessary before beginning the investigation of its sorcerous parallel that comprises our main theme.

The shape of Old Norse religion

In some senses, as with the mythology, the structure of Nordic pre-Christian religion is well-known. The general syntheses give a thorough grounding in the cults of the gods, and in the practical reflections of the cosmology considered above (the latest of these is Steinsland 2005, but see also earlier overviews such as Ström 1961b and Holtsmark 1992 [1970], DuBois 1999; Lindow 2001; Näsström 2002a; others are considered later in the chapter). However, of the physical structures of religion, the material culture of places of 'worship', the landscapes in which they were set, and the functionaries who served there, far less is known.

The work that set the pattern for studies of Nordic cult buildings was Olaf Olsen's *Hørg, hof og kirke* (1966), which placed the majority of pre-Christian rituals in open-air enclosures and sacred groves that would leave minimal archaeological trace. Olsen proposed a hierarchy of cult sites, with the *hof* as a permanent religious centre in a building, and the *horgr* as a less elaborate 'holy place for nature-worship' (*ibid*: 282). To these were added other, less easily defined, sites for religious observance, such as the *vé* sanctuaries that were

tentatively identified with the kind of massive stone settings found under the royal mounds at Jelling, and at Lejre. Olsen's views fitted neatly with the occasional excavated traces of 'temples', such as the structural remains found beneath the churches at Mære (Lidén 1969) and Gamla Uppsala (excavated by Lindqvist in 1926 and reported by Nordahl in 1996). Together these formed a composite picture of a few major 'cult centres', often under the patronage of elites or serving the needs of fledgling kingdoms, surrounded by a more dispersed network of local places of reverence (though see Brink 1992 and Gräslund 1992 for important critique of Olsen's concept of cult continuity).

Fresh material appeared in the late 1980s, when the boom in Scandinavian infrastructure development led to large numbers of rural excavations in advance of pipelines, motorways and rail links. As a result of this work, which has continued ever since, a number of new structures have been found which support the idea of small-scale, local cultic and votive activities carried out at special sites. The modest buildings and enclosures found in these contexts resemble Olsen's idea of the *horgr* or something similar. In Sweden such structures have so far been found as part of extended farmstead complexes of the Viking Age at Sanda and the Migration period at Säby, both in Uppland (Åqvist 1996), and on a Viking period farm at Borg in Östergötland (Nielsen 1997); interesting work has also been undertaken in Norway from a landscape perspective (Heide 2014). More ephemeral stone constructions, often bounded with posts and with deposits of offerings have been found at Helgö (Zachrisson 2004), Götavi (Svensson 2010), and Lilla Ullevi (Bäck *et al.* 2008; Hållans Stenholm 2010) amongst others (Price 2014a & b). There are also more spectacular exceptions, such as the extraordinary cult building – really, almost a 'temple' – with several centuries of occupation at the proto-urban site of Uppåkra in Skåne, the predecessor to Lund (Larsson 2004, 2006, 2007).

At the same time, new studies of sources for the Gamla Uppsala 'temple' have suggested that it may have been a very large feasting hall in which pagan festivals took place at certain times, rather than a dedicated religious building in its own right (see Dillmann's article and other papers in Hultgård 1997; Alkarp & Price 2005; Sundqvist & Vikstrand 2013; Eriksson 2018). Olsen's *hof* would fit this pattern, with the slight change that the cultic rituals were held actually in the homes of the leading families – or in the royal hall, in the case of Gamla Uppsala. The notion of prominent buildings taking on a

temporary role as ‘temples’ for *blót* ceremonies or other rituals is now generally accepted, and has gained further support from the new programme of excavations to re-evaluate earlier findings at the famous Icelandic site of Hofstaðir. The cultic functions do not not seem to be clearly reflected in the architecture of the admittedly high-status hall, but the building was decorated by the skulls of oxen sacrificed in seasonal rituals (Lucas & McGovern 2007; Lucas 2009).

The final and most elusive component of this cultic landscape, that of the open-air sanctuaries, has also left some remarkable physical traces. For a long time the only known example came from the island of Frösö in the Storsjö lake near Östersund in Sweden, where excavations in the mid-1980s under the floor of the medieval church uncovered the remains of what appears to be a Viking-Age sacrificial grove (the find is summarised in Hildebrandt 1989, the osteological material is treated in Iregren 1989 and Magnell & Iregren 2010; Näsström 1996 provides a general comment). Directly under the site of the medieval altar was found the badly-decayed remains of a birch tree, with a trunk approximately 0.5 m in diameter and root systems spreading out up to 3 m. The tree had clearly been deliberately felled. Spread over an area of 9 m^2 around the stump was a very large assemblage of animal bones, which on stratigraphic grounds could be seen to have accumulated while the tree was still standing. The bones were mostly from quite young animals, primarily game. They were not from ordinary food remains or slaughter-waste, though a few of them bore traces of butchery. Some animals were represented by the whole body, while others were present only as skulls. In total, the following •••remains can be reconstructed: 5 bears (whole body) 6 elks (heads only) 2 •stags (heads only) 5 sheep/goats (primarily heads, very few bones from legs ••and feet) 11 pigs (primarily heads, very few bones from legs and feet) 2 •cows (primarily heads, very few bones from legs and feet) Bones from reindeer, squirrel, and teeth from horse and dog Radiocarbon dates were obtained from the deposits with the bones (920 ± 140 cal. AD) and the latest roots of the tree (1060 ± 75 cal. AD), suggesting that the site was in use in the tenth century and the tree probably cut down in the eleventh. Two large Viking-Age burial mounds survive in what is now the churchyard, and would have lain only a few metres from the tree. It is also possible that these were part of a larger cemetery, now removed by the modern graves.

Everything points to the Frösö tree as being the site of animal offerings, perhaps deposited there as the remains of feasts, or actually hanging from the boughs and later falling to the ground as the bodies decayed. The latter would seem to fit the five whole animals (the bears), while the others could also have been set up as hides with the cranium and hooves attached (the domestic livestock), or present as severed heads (the elk and deer). The place-name associated with the church is Hov (*i.e. hof*), and Frösö means 'Freyr's Island', both of which are at least of Viking-Age date and would perfectly fit a cult site. The whole complex is also situated at the highest point of the island, with a viewshed far over the surrounding lakelands and mountains.

The Frösö example has now been joined by the major, and perplexing, sacrificial complex at Lunda in Södermanland, Sweden (Andersson 2006; Andersson *et al.* 2004, 2008), where a low hill has been the scene of repeated and long-term rituals of discard and offering but without a clear spatial focus. Scatterings of material, including manufacturing waste, have been strewn through trees and among the rocks in what was clearly a special place with a long continuity in the life of its communities – a different kind of *lunda* (grove) but perhaps just as important. A nearby sequence of buildings also preserves ritual deposits in the form of gilded figurines, adding to the engima of the site. To this can be added the growing study of ritual deposits in lakes, rivers and wetlands, another dimension of open-air ritual (*e.g.* Lund 2008, 2009; Raffield 2014).

All the above can be combined to give us the structural components of the cultic landscape – the temple-halls, the open-air sanctuaries of the *horgr* and *vé*, and the sacred groves with their offerings (Carlie 2006; Mattes 2008; Nordberg 2011; Sundqvist 2016; Kaliff & Mattes 2017; Holst *et al.* 2017). However, an important dimension of this that is only now beginning to be recognised is the way in which such places were also reflected in the organisation of the landscape itself. Our point of access to this is through the place-names, and by extension to what they once represented in terms of physical settlement.

These approaches have been extensively developed over many years by Stefan Brink (*e.g.* 1990, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2013), who presents a series of case-studies from all over Sweden examining the social development of landscape during the Viking Age. He has argued that the small polities from

which early kingdoms developed were built up effectively as a series of components, spatially distinct in a functionally-zoned landscape of settlement. The name of each place reflects a different political or social function, and together they build a network of religious and secular power imprinted on a careful spatial organisation. In the various areas that Brink presents, we see that the names of the sacred landscape cluster around those of the political one. Thus we find central-place signals such as *husa*, *tuna* and *sal* alongside the sacral names of *lunda*, *vi, harg*, *hov, *al* and *åker*. The theophoric names have also been focused upon by Per Vikstrand, with a case study of the area around Storsjö lake in Jämtland (1996), and broader syntheses in 2001 and 2004 on the sacred patterning of space.

At the broadest level we can thus perceive a landscape of 'religious' functions, interwoven with the structures of secular power. From archaeology we can also reconstruct what some of these sites of cultic centres may have looked like in reality. The missing element is that of the human practitioners and functionaries who served at these places, and through whom the system of Viking religion worked.

In my remarks above on the nature of religion, I drew a distinction between the modern popular understanding of this term – its connotations of orthodoxy and controlled interpretation – and the belief systems of the Viking Age. However, this statement can be qualified in some ways, because there is also direct evidence of social stratification in the access to supernatural knowledge. These people are known partly from the later written sources – occasional mentions in the sagas and *þættir* – but also from runestones and place-names. Some of the latter reflect the offices of those who served there.

At one level are the secular, political names, beginning with the power-holding individuals from the king (*konungr*) through the highest stratum of chieftains such as the *drótt*, *jarl* and *hersir*. Here we also find the second tier of terms for military retinues and local administrators – *karlar*, *rinkar, drængar, svennar* and so on (Brink 1996: 267f and references therein). Alongside these we find much more shadowy traces of what seem to have been cultic leaders. Included in this were a number of figures whose precise function is somewhat obscure – the *vivil*, *erilaR*, *þulr* and *véseti* – along with others such as the **lytir*, who appear to have had some divinatory or lot-casting associations. The concept of a 'priesthood' is probably misleading here,

as there is no evidence of formal initiations into the requirements of a specific office, but rather an emphasis on directed skills in finite contexts. What little evidence there is suggests that some or all of these individuals possessed a knowledge of runic lore, the recitation of magical formulae, and perhaps a responsibility for the maintenance of oral record-keeping (the main sources are summarised by Brink 1996: 266f and Sundqvist 1998, 2007, while a more cursory overview may be found in Näsström 2002b: 92–101).

Some of these people spanned the divide between spiritual and secular power, the most profound manifestation of which has been put forward in the notion of sacral kingship (a complete summary of the considerable research in this field may be found in Sundqvist 2002). Though there is little evidence to suggest that the early Nordic kings were actually thought to be divine, the royal appropriation of religious roles and associations was clearly central to the long process of state formation and the consolidation of centralised power.

The same pattern was played out at a more mundane level, in the form of the *goði* (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998b). These were the wealthy landowners and chieftains who also seem to have fulfilled a kind of ‘priestly’ function as officiaries in cultic performances. It was probably these men whose great feasting halls were what was meant by the *hof* that we have seen above, and in *Ynglingasaga* 5 Snorri specifically mentions *hofgoðar*. The evidence for these figures is overwhelmingly Icelandic in origin, though the sagas place them in other countries too, such as Norway. Outside Iceland the term is known only from two Danish runestones, with inscriptions that hint at the *goðar* having once had a purely ritual function, their political power developing over time (Brink 1996: 267; Näsström 2002b: 94ff).

The *goði* also had a female equivalent, the *gyðja*, whom we will encounter again in the context of sorcery. The role of women in the officialdom of cultic practice was taken up relatively early in Viking studies, especially in relation to fertility rituals (*e.g.* Phillpotts 1914), and it is clear that some of the *gyðja* enjoyed a very high status in the apparatus of cult. Several factors suggest a connection to Freyja and the Vanir, and both the *goði* and the *gyðja* could have responsibility for the sacrificial *blót* (cf. Näsström 2002b: 97f; Ljungkvist 2011).

A constant element in the written descriptions of all these ‘offices’ and ‘titles’ is that they could occasionally be combined with additional roles –

again, this merging of secular and ‘religious’ power. There are suggestions that the inner access to the gods and their servants was relatively restricted, but more along lines of social standing than of initiation into the mysteries. Similarly, the various ‘officials’ mentioned above do not seem to have had a priest-like monopoly on communication with otherworldly powers, and this is important when we come to consider sorcery below. It is also clear that behind the cultic rites and those responsible for them, there was another level of popular belief and unarticulated superstition.

Here we find the mythology reflected in small ways, in everyday practices corresponding to everyday beliefs – though the latter may be far from mundane. In *Gylfaginning* (51) Snorri gives us a glimpse of this, relating to two aspects of the Ragnarok story. In the account above we have seen the ‘Nail-Ship’, Naglfar, and the vital role it plays in ferrying the armies of evil to fight against the gods. Because it is made from the fingernails of the dead, Snorri explains that this is why one should be very careful to trim the nails of a dying person – there is no reason to hasten the ship’s construction by contributing the raw materials. The exact corollary of this is mentioned later in the same passage, in relation to Víðarr’s shoe. After Fenrir has swallowed Óðinn, his son Víðarr plants his foot on the wolf’s lower jaw, which he presses down while forcing its mouth wider and wider. Fenrir is torn in two, and Óðinn is avenged. The animal’s jaws are enormous, stretching from the earth to the sky, so Víðarr obviously needs some impressive footwear: Snorri tells us that his shoe is sewn from all the tiny scraps of leather left over when anything is made here in Miðgarðr. One should therefore be careful to throw these away, because every little helps.

The same process is probably visible in the archaeology of pendant ‘amulets’ and ‘charms’ of the kind that we shall consider in chapter 3. Occasionally we are given a small window onto a broader scene, in which we can perceive not just objects but actions taken with them. A good example emerged at Birka in the excavations of the early 1990s, when a number of amulets of different kinds were found built into the make-up of a road through the town. Too many of these were found within a small area for there to be any question of accidental loss, and it seems certain that an amulet ring, Þórr’s hammer and a miniature weapon were deliberately laid down while the road was undergoing one of its periodic repairs (see Price 1995b: 75f).

The fabric of religious belief and practice in Viking-Age Scandinavia can be seen to have been nuanced, multi-scalar and far from static, with a degree of regional variation and change over time. Seen against this pattern of semi-structured spirituality, how does sorcery fit in?

The double world: *seiðr* and the problem of Old Norse 'magic'

In 1986 when the French Viking specialist Régis Boyer published his study of Old Norse magic, he chose as his title *Le monde du double*, 'the world of the double'. As he makes clear in his introduction, it often comes as a surprise to realise just how fundamental a role the practice of magic played in the Scandinavian mental universe. In his concept of the 'Double', he tries to frame this as a kind of parallel belief, a mirror held up alongside the more elevated apparatus of Viking 'religion' proper. To some extent I would agree with his assessment, though I feel that the two worlds are more closely linked than he credits. The reason for this lies once again in terminology and what we understand by it.

We have already seen how our modern concepts of 'religion' are not necessarily compatible with those of the Viking Age. We can make the same observation about the social environment of sorcery at the same period. The first problems come at the level of apparently simple definition, which on closer inspection turns out to be far from straightforward (*e.g.* Raudvere 2003: 25–88). Today we speak fluidly of 'magic' and 'witchcraft', the working of 'spells' and 'charms', all performed by 'sorcerers', 'witches', 'warlocks', 'wizards' and so on. In popular parlance there is little to choose between any of these terms, but no-one would link them with formal religion as it is generally perceived. In the early medieval period the situation was very different, in two ways.

Firstly, there seems to have been a very precise vocabulary of sorcery, encompassing its forms, functions, practice and practitioners. Secondly, through intimate links with divinities such as Óðinn and Freyja, and also in its underlying principles which included some of the soul beliefs reviewed above, the whole structure of sorcery was interlaced with that of cult. Simek (1993: 199) has perhaps come closest to illuminating this relationship when he writes of magic as "the mentality [and] the practices with which the mechanisms of supernatural powers are set into motion".

When defined in this way, it is clear from the written sources that one concept above others lay at the core of Old Norse concepts of magic. Its name was *seiðr*, and its closer study will be central to much of this book.

Seiðr would have been pronounced approximately ‘saythe’, rhyming with the modern English ‘swathe’, but with a slightly inflected ‘r’ sound at the end in the nominative form (similar to ‘the’ when spoken before a consonant, thus ‘sayther’). Several scholars have noted that etymologically it seems to belong to a group of Indo-European words with connotations of ‘binding’, especially in a sorcerous context (*e.g.* Dronke 1997: 133).

It is described at length in a number of Old Norse sources, and circumstantially in a great many more. These are all reviewed in detail below, but at this point we can simply note that it seems to have been a collective term for a whole complex of practices, each serving a different function within the larger system of sorcery. There were *seiðr* rituals for divination and clairvoyance; for seeking out the hidden, both in the secrets of the mind and in physical locations; for healing the sick; for bringing good luck; for controlling the weather; for calling game animals and fish. Importantly, it could also be used for the opposite of these things – to curse an individual or an enterprise; to blight the land and make it barren; to induce illness; to tell false futures and thus to set their recipients on a road to disaster; to injure, maim and kill, in domestic disputes and especially in battle.

More than anything else, *seiðr* seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties. Even in its battlefield context, rather than outright violence it mostly involved the clouding of judgement, the freezing of the will, the fatal hesitation. It was also closely linked to the summoning of spirits and other beings of various kinds, who could be bound to the sorcerer’s will and then sent off to do her or his bidding. In line with the ‘invisible population’ we have encountered above, an important category of these beings were also extensions of the individual in its manifestations of a multiple soul – the *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* and so on.

The link to cultic practice comes primarily through the god Óðinn, who as we shall see is named in several sources as the supreme master of *seiðr*, along with Freyja from whom he learnt its power. The Vanir provide a clue to another important aspect of this sorcery, in their role as divinities of fertility and sexual potency. Not only do many *seiðr* rituals seem to have been sexual

in their objectives, but they may also have been so in the nature of their performance. Beyond the practices with specific carnal intentions, this emphasis on sexuality is also often found in a surprising number of *seiðr*'s other functions reviewed above. By extension, the enactment of these rites seems to have placed so great a demand on their performers as to mark them with a different form of gender identity, outside the conventional norms of Viking-Age society.

It is in connection with all these elements that *seiðr* has consistently been viewed as a Norse counterpart to what has elsewhere been called shamanism. This, together with the social context and functions of *seiðr*, forms the subject of the following chapters. We shall look especially at *seiðr*'s employment in warfare and as part of what we might call a divinely-inspired ideology of martial valour, backed up by the constructions of sexuality and gender with which it was underpinned. However, *seiðr* is far from the only form of sorcery mentioned in the Old Norse sources, and before proceeding further we first need to pose a question as to the nature of these other magics, their relationship with *seiðr*, and the degree to which they may be considered collectively.

The other magics: galdr, gandr and 'Óðinnic sorcery'

Essentially there occur five categories of sorcery in the sources, besides *seiðr* itself. Three of them were also named complexes of ritual and technique – though apparently in a looser sense than *seiðr* – while the others are modern constructions which derive from an analysis of the texts: *galdr gandr útiseta* a group of un-named rituals connected through the abilities of the god Óðinn, here termed 'Óðinnic sorcery'

- a general 'background noise' of popular magic, often unsophisticated or indeed completely unarticulated in a practical way, occurring throughout the literature The most distinctive of these five is undoubtedly *galdr*, which seems to have been a specific form of sorcery focusing on a characteristic type of high-pitched singing. The word has a relative today in the modern Swedish verb *gala*, used for the crowing of a rooster and for the most piercing of birdcalls (see Raudvere 2001: 90–7 and 2002 on the importance of verbalising this kind of sorcery). The saga descriptions of *galdr*-songs note that they were pleasing to the ear, and there is a suggestion of a special rhythm in view of the incantation metre called *galdralag*, as described by Snorri in *Háttatal* (101–2) and used occasionally in Eddic poems such as *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífomál*.

One of the first major studies of the form was made by Ivar Lindquist (1923), but he applied the term very liberally to a broad range of charms from the whole of the Iron Age. Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 71, 76, 81) argued that *galdr* was employed most often for cursing, with an emphasis on the destructive power of the tongue – he cites examples of its use to induce sicknesses of various kinds in both humans and animals, and also to kill. He claims a close connection between *galdr* and runic lore (*ibid*: 81). However, *galdr* in fact occurs in a variety of contexts as we shall see in the coming chapters, and it seems that its status as a distinct form of magic was probably beginning to blur by the end of the Viking period.

It performed many, if not all, of the same functions as *seiðr*, and in a great many instances the two are used in combination (the term *seiðgaldr* even occurs in a fourteenth-century source that we shall examine below). Despite this, in every case it is *seiðr* which sets the pattern for the ritual as a whole. *Galdr* can be seen rather as a particular element in a larger complex of

operative magical practice, one option in the toolkit of ritual. By the Middle Ages proper, the term had become synonymous with magic in general.

Gandr forms yet another distinct category here, with origins that go back much earlier than the Viking Age. The basic sense of the word is often argued to mean simply ‘magic’, and de Vries has suggested that it can be related to the concept of Ginnungagap (1931a; his interpretation is discussed in chapter 3). This is important, as it suggests *gandr* to be one of the primal forces from which the worlds were formed, and thus implies that this form of sorcerous power was of considerable dignity. That this type of sorcery also had an early history is shown by tantalising references from Classical writers, for example the name *Ganna* attributed by Dio Cassius in his *Roman History* (67: 5) to the prophetess of the North German Semnones, and which is also from the same root (de Vries 1957: §229; see also Closs 1936).

By the Viking Age, and as with *galdr*, we find combinations of ritual forms. In several instances there are references to sorceresses using *gandr* in conjunction with *seiðr* in order to prophesy, for example in *Voluspá* (22, 29). The term also had a special application in the sense of both spirit beings and the staff that may have been used to summon them; these are discussed in chapter 3.

Another aspect of Norse sorcery was the practice of *útiseta*, ‘sitting out’, which does not seem to have been a specific ritual so much as a technique to put other rituals into effect. Clearly related to Óðinnic communications with the dead, in brief it seems to have involved sitting outside at night, in special places such as burial mounds, by running water or beneath the bodies of the hanged, in order to receive spiritual power. It is considered in greater depth in chapter 3.

The rituals performed by Óðinn form a category in their own right, beyond the specific complexes of *seiðr* and *galdr*, both of which the god employs. Several of them are also available to human sorcerers, but the Eddic poems make it clear that others are not, and are among the powers purchased on the god’s many quests for magical knowledge. These skills are recorded in the list of spells in poems such as *Hávamál*, in the catalogues of runes of power, and in the narratives of sagas. Again, they are reviewed in the following chapters.

Besides the magic used by Óðinn, we also find the fifth category of ‘general’ sorcery. One aspect of this has a vocabulary of terms that appear to

mean simply ‘magic’ in the same vague sense as we use the word today. The most common of these was *fjolkyngi*, which seems to have been especially well-used. In the Old Norse sources we also find *fróðleikr*, and slightly later, *trolldómr* (cf. Raudvere 2001: 88ff). The latter concept became increasingly common through the Middle Ages, and together with *galdr* it continued as one of the generic words for ‘witchcraft’ long into post-medieval times (see Hastrup 1987: 331–6 for Icelandic terminologies of magic during this period).

There were also other terms which were used as collectives. These include *gerningar*, *ljóð* and *taufr* – all apparently kinds of chant or charm – and the complexities of runic lore as set out in Eddic poems such as *Sigrdrífomál* and *Rígsþula*. Another group of terms refers to various forms of unspecified magical knowledge, and include affixes implying this on the part of people or supernatural beings. Thus we find *vísenda-*, *kúnatta-* and similar words used for ‘those who know’, a relatively common perception of sorcerous power that occurs in many cultures.

Given these ‘other’ magics, to what extent can we discuss Old Norse sorcery in generic terms, and can we use the terminologies of *seiðr* for this purpose?

The key lies in the definition of sorcery itself, both in the sense usually employed by historians of religions and also with specific reference to the Viking Age. Even without the conventions of ‘worship’ discussed above, the human relationship to the gods was not an equal one, and inevitably involved a degree of subservience that characterised all the different kinds of cult activity that we have examined. This applies to the notion of *blót*, ‘sacrifice’, in particular. In the world of sorcery this was not the case, a state of affairs that hinges on the idea of control. Magic seems to have been used by human beings as a means of *actively* steering the actions of supernatural beings for their own ends, first attracting or summoning them, and then binding them to do the sorcerer’s will (cf. Ström 1961b: 221f).

In one form or another this concept is common to all the different magics reviewed above, but only in one of them is it made explicit – in *seiðr*. This ‘binding’ sorcery is also the only one conceived as a complete type of magic in the original sources, and the only form of it that combines elements of the others into a greater whole. As we have seen, although both *galdr* and *gandr* are also categorised in the written sources, the former was more of a technique

while the latter seems to have referred mainly to a general kind of sorcerous energy from which all power was drawn. Again, when each (or both) of these are performed in conjunction with *seiðr*, there is never any doubt that the latter is the primary, formative element in the ritual.

In this specific sense, there are therefore grounds for discussing *seiðr* as a generic for Old Norse sorcery. However, this is also warranted by the general vagueness of the descriptions of Viking magic, this lack of consistent orthodoxy which as we have seen was an integral part of the Norse attitude to the spiritual. Again and again in the sources, and in the terminologies of sorcerers that we will examine in the next chapter, we seem to find *seiðr* used *simultaneously* as a precise term and also as a generalisation for 'sorcery' in our modern sense of the word. In using *seiðr* as a primary category, in a manner that implicitly includes the other magics, we would therefore seem to be following the fashion in which the Norse themselves understood the concept.

We can now review the written sources on which our knowledge of *seiðr* is based.

Seiðr in the sources

By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when many of the heroic sagas and *fornaldarsögur* were composed, *seiðr* had become incorporated into the general stock of fantastic magical phenomena with which medieval authors entertained their readers. However, there is no doubt that at least in Iceland, and very probably in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia too, at least some details of its Viking-Age reality were remembered. Not least, these included the breadth of *seiðr*'s applications and functions, and its capacity to produce positive and negative effects. The prologue to *Gongu-Hrólfs saga*, one of the most outlandish of the medieval 'Viking' romances, gives us a brief glimpse of how *seiðr* was perceived in the High Middle Ages:

Er þat ok margra heimskra manna náttúra, at þeir trúa því einu, er þeir sjá sínum augum eða heyra sínum eyrum, er þeim þykkir fjarlægt sinni náttúru, svá sem orðit hefir um vitra mannaráðagerðir eða mikit afl eða frábæran léttleika fyrirmanna, svá ok eigi síðr um konstir eða huklaraskap ok mikla fjolkyngi, þá þeir seiddu at sumum monnum ævinliga ógæfu eða aldrtila, en sumum veraldar virðing, fjár ok metnaðar. Þeir æstu stundum hofuðskepnur, en

stundum kyrrðu, svá sem var Óðinn eða aðrir þeir, er af honum námu galdrlistir eða lækningar.

Moreover there are plenty of people so foolish that they believe nothing but what they have seen with their own eyes or heard with their own ears – never anything unfamiliar to them, such as the counsels of the wise, or the strength and amazing skills of the great heroes, or the way in which *seiðr*, skills of the mind *[huklaraskap]* and powerful sorcery [*fjolkyngi*] may *seið** death or a lifetime of misery for some, or bestow worldly honours, riches and rank on others. These [men] would sometimes stir up the elements, and sometimes calm them down, just like Óðinn and all those who learnt from him the skills of *galdr* and healing.

* *seið* is here used as a verb – see chapter 3

Gongu-Hrólfs saga prologue translation after Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1980: 27, with my amendments

Viewed as a whole, it is true to say that the corpus of Icelandic sagas, skaldic verse and Eddic poetry is saturated with references to sorcery in general, and *seiðr* in particular. Its practitioners are of both sexes and are given a variety of titles, but the constant prevalence of magic never subsides.

Even taking into account the wavering reliability of the sagas as sources for the Viking Age that they describe, in view of the sheer cumulative volume of references to ‘everyday’ witchcraft it is surprising that so little work has been done on its integration into our models of the Viking world. Philologists have discussed sorcery, certainly, but almost exclusively in terms of medieval literary motifs and narrative structure. They have not tried to relate it to any kind of Viking-Age reality, and understandably so because this is not part of the research agenda for ancient linguistics. Historians of religions have sought patterns of behaviour, and the ‘roots’ of different aspects of cult – especially that of Óðinn – but here again there have been relatively few attempts to build up an image of sorcery as it was perceived at the time. Although there are numerous synthetic treatments of Viking religion, referenced throughout this book, these do not generally present belief in the broader context of society in general (a good exception is Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994, but

this is deliberately written at a popular level and does not go into depth). Archaeological syntheses, equally common, tend to suffer from the same problem in reverse, reducing religion to a summary of the gods and Eddic myths in so far as they can be linked to material culture. These works have largely tended to ignore magic and witchcraft due to the difficulties of accessing such phenomena through the archaeological record. There are, of course, exceptions to which we shall return below.

We can begin by briefly summarising the textual sources for *seiðr*. The first comprehensive collection was made by Strömbäck (1935: 17–107; see also the supplementary note by Almqvist 2000: 250–60), which includes all the primary texts. Since the first edition of the present work appeared, the complete corpus of Old Norse prose sources relating to sorcery has been published and analysed in meticulous philological detail by Dillmann (2006), with an emphasis on the family sagas, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, but also with digressions through the legendary sagas. The second volume of Tolley's 2009a work on Norse shamanism also assembles an impressive list of source material that goes beyond the purely Icelandic emphasis of Dillmann's work, and can be profitably consulted to broaden the textual background. Both Dillmann and Tolley have here done an immense service to scholarship, and the wider aspects of their books are discussed further in chapter 8.

The most important textual excerpts are quoted in full here, while a selection of others are merely referenced; these are taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters.

Skaldic poetry

The corpus of skaldic poetry contains two direct references to *seiðr*, and a number of kennings that play upon it. The earliest dated reference occurs in a *lausavísa* of Vitgeirr seiðmaðr, significantly a sorcerer himself. It was probably composed around 900 and is contained in chapter 35 of Snorri's *Haralds saga ins* hárfagra. It is quoted in full in chapter 3, in the section on male practitioners of magic.

Seiðr is also mentioned in strophe 3 of the skaldic praise-poem *Sigurðardrápa*, composed by Kormákr Ogmundarson around 960. The poet alludes to Óðinn's rape of Rindr, achieved by means of disguising himself through sorcery, with the words: *seið Yggr til Rindar*, 'Yggr [*i.e.* Óðinn] got Rindr with *seiðr*'.

Two verses from the thirteenth-century *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, attributed to Fríðþjof himself, mention rituals that are described as *seiðr* in the accompanying prose, but cannot be taken as direct early evidence for it (in Skjaldedigtning BII: 295).

The term also appears in four kennings, from three sources. The first is from a *lausavísa* of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, dated *c.*924 by Finnur Jónsson:

Upp skulum órum sverðum, ulfs tannlituðr, glitra, eigum doð at drýgja, í dalmiskunn fiska; leiti upp til Lundar lýða hverr sem bráðast, gerum þar fyr sjot sólar seið ófagran vigra.

We shall, painter of the wolf's tooth [warrior], make our swords glitter in the air. We have to perform our deeds in the mild season of the valley-fish [snakes > summer]. Let everyone go as quickly as possible up to Lund. Let us make the harsh spear-*seiðr* before sunset.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson *lausavísa* 6 (Skjaldedigtning BI: 43), translation after Fell 1975: 184

This is a problematic poem, mainly because we know from archaeological data that the town of Lund was definitely not in existence in the early tenth century. There is thus no doubt that the text of Egill's verse is at least partly corrupt. However, the attribution of the poem to a different battle than that for which it was written, for whatever reason, does not affect the kenning of *vigra seiðr*, nor its probable location in the original verse.

Two more *seiðr*-kennings were used by the eleventh-century skald Eiríkr viðsjá, in *lausavísur* dated to the year 1014. Both occur in battle contexts, and seem to refer to warriors in both instances (*logðis seiðr*, 'destruction's *seiðr*' – str. 5; *Fjolnis seiðr*, 'Fjolnir's *seiðr*' – str. 6). The fourth kenning, from strophe 12 of Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*, dates to the 1260s. Simpler in form, *sverða seiðr* means 'sword-*seiðr*' and is a clear parallel to Egill's *vigra seiðr* of three centuries earlier.

The intended sense in all these examples seems to be of *seiðr* as a song, depicting the fighting warrior as embodying a sort of hymn to combat or to the patrons of such (a common theme in kennings).

Eddic poetry

From the corpus of Eddic poetry, we first find references to *seiðr* in *Voluspá* (22), with slight variations between the Codex Regius and Hauksbók texts (Strömbäck 1935: 17–21). The original composition of the poem is most often dated to the very late tenth century, though its preservation stems from the early 1200s when the first – now lost – versions of the Codex Regius version seem to have been composed. Our existing texts derive from the late thirteenth century (Dronke 1997: 62f). The text is given here from Dronke's edition, with a rather free translation by Larrington; its interpretation and alternative, more exact translations are discussed below:

Heiði hana héto	Bright Heiðr they called her,
hvars til húsa kom,	wherever she came to houses,
volo vel spá	the seer with pleasing prophecies,
– vitti hón ganda.	she charmed them with spells;
Seið hón kunni,	she made *seiðr* whenever she could,
seið hón leikin.	with *seiðr* she played with minds,
Æ var hón angan	she was always the favourite
illrar brúðar.	of wicked women.

Voluspá 22; text after Dronke 1997, translation after Larrington 1996: 7

Seiðr appears again in *Lokasenna* (24), the ritualistic exchange of insults which many scholars believe to be an original composition by a pagan poet of the late Viking Age, or at least a twelfth- or thirteenth-century embellishment of such (Dronke 1997: 355). In one of his series of slanders directed against the gods, an in reply to Óðinn, Lóki makes the following allegation:

En þik síða kóðo	But you, they said, performed *seiðr*
Sámseyio í,	on Samsø,
ok draptu á vétt sem *volor*.	and tapped on a *vétt* like the *volur*.
Vitka líki	Like a *vitka*
fórtu verþióð yfir,	you went over the world of men,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.	and that I thought to be *argr* behaviour.

Lokasenna 24; text after Dronke 1997, with her translation and my amendments This introduces several of the key themes in the study of Old Norse sorcery: its context, its practitioners (the *volur* and the *vitkar*, amongst others), the ritual itself and its equipment (the *vétt*), and its social connotations

(the idea of *argr*, or *ergi*). All these are taken up in detail in chapter 3, where the *Lokasenna* passage is reviewed.

The third *seiðr*-reference in the Eddic corpus comes from strophe 33 of *Hyndluljóð*, as part of what is generally agreed to be an interpolation known as the 'Shorter Voluspá' (*Voluspá in skamma*) which is also quoted in *Gylfaginning* 5. The passage recounts the genealogical ancestry of sorcerers:

Ero volor allar
vitkar allir
en seiðberendr
iotnar allir
frá Viðólfi,
frá Vilmeiði,
frá Svarthofða,
frá Ymi komnir.

All the *volur* are descended from Viðólfr, all the *vitkar* from Vilmeiðr, and the *seiðberendr* from Svarthofði, all the giants come from Ymir.

Text: Neckel & Kuhn 1983; translation after Larrington 1996: 257

The 'Shorter Voluspá' is generally agreed to be later than the rest of *Hyndluljóð*, with datings ranging from the late 1100s (Klingenberg 1974: 9, 36) to a century later (Finnur Jónsson 1920: 206; de Vries 1967: 107ff; the arguments are summarised by Steinsland 1991: 247f, who suggests that the poem is in fact a unified work, including the 'interpolation'). Here the focus is once again on specific types of practitioner, with the *volur* and *vitkar* being joined by the *seiðberendi*, the '*seiðr*-carrier' which is discussed in chapter 3.

The sagas of the kings

In the royal sagas of Snorri's *Heimskringla* we encounter *seiðr* on numerous occasions, generally presented in incidental fashion embedded in the narrative. However, in one source it is presented in a more explanatory context, and this is of course the *Ynglingasaga*. It first appears in chapter 4, when we read of the introduction of sorcery to the Æsir gods by Freyja:

Dóttir Niarðar var Freyja; hon var blótgyðja; hon kendi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vonum var títt.

The daughter of Njorðr was Freyja; she was a *blótgyðja* ['priestess of sacrifices']; she was the first to teach *seiðr* to the Æsir, as it was practiced among the Vanir.

Ynglingasaga 4; my translation

The importance of this gift becomes clear in chapter 7 of the *Ynglingasaga*, when Snorri declares how it was used by Óðinn, who came to be the supreme master of this form of magic. The reference to *seiðr* is contained in a longer description of the god's powers, and this context is important to preserve in its shifts of emphasis and tone, and the distinctions drawn between different categories of sorcery which are here introduced for the first time:

Óðinn skipti Homum, lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þár fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lond at sínum erendum eða annarra manna. Þat kunni hann enn at gera með orðum einum at sløkva eld ok kyrra sjá ok snúa vindum, hverja leið er hann vildi, ok hann átti skip þat, er Skíðblaðnir hét, er hann fór á yfir hof stór, en þat mátti vefja saman sem dúk. Óðinn hafði með sér hofuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum tíðendi ór oðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jorðu eða settisk undir hanga; fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn. Hann átti hrafna ii, er hann hafði tamit við mál; flugu þeir víða um lond ok sogðu honum morg tíðendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr. Alla þessar íþróttir kendi hann með rúnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita; fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðir galdrasmiðir. Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlog manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera monnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá monnum vit eða afl ok gefa oðrum. En þessi fjolkyngi, ef framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmonnum skammlaust viðat fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt. Óðinn vissi um alt jarðfé, hvar fólgit var, ok hann kunni þau ljóð, er upp lauksk fyrir honum jorðin ok bjorg ok steinar ok haugarnir, ok batt hann með orðum einum þá, er fyrir bjoggu, ok gekk inn ok tók þar slíkt, er hann vildi. Af þessum kroptum varð hann mjok frægr, óvinir hans óttuðusk hann, en vinir hans treystusk honum ok trúðu á krapt hans ok á sjálfan hann. En hann kendi flestar íþróttir sínar blótgoðunum; váru þeir næst honum um allan fróðleik ok fjolkyngi. Margir aðrir námu þó mikit af, ok hefir þaðan af dreifzk fjolkyngin víða ok haldizk lengi.

Óðinn could change his shape [*hamr*], when his body would lie there as if asleep or dead, while he himself was a bird or an animal, a fish or a snake, and would travel in an instant to far-off lands on his errands or those of other men.

He was also able, using words alone, to extinguish fires and to calm the sea, and to turn the winds wherever he wished. He had a ship called Skíðblaðnir [‘Built From Pieces Of Thin Wood’] with which he sailed over great seas, but which could be folded up like a cloth. Óðinn had with him Mímr’s head, and it told him many tidings from other worlds [*heimar*]; at times he would wake up dead men out of the ground or sit beneath the hanged; from this he was called Lord of Ghosts or Lord of the Hanged. He had two ravens, which he had endowed with the power of speech; they flew far over the land and told him many tidings. In this way he became very wise. And all these skills he taught with runes and those chants [*ljóð*] that are called *galdrar*; because of this the Æsir are called *galdrasmíðir* [‘*galdra*-smiths’]. Óðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power, and which he performed himself, that which is called *seiðr*. By means of it he could know the futures of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death or misfortune or sickness, as well as take men’s wits or strength from them and give them to others. But this sorcery [*fjolkyngi*], as is known, brings with it so much *ergi* that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill was taught to the priestesses [*gyðjur*]. Óðinn knew everything about treasures hidden in the earth, where they were concealed, and he knew such chants [*ljóð*] that would open up for him the earth and mountains and stones and burial mounds, and with words alone he bound those who dwelled there, and went in and took what he wanted. By these powers he became very famous – his enemies feared him, but his friends trusted him, and believed in him and his power. Most of these skills he taught to those in charge of the sacrifices [*blótgoði*]; they were next to him in all magic knowledge [*fróðleikr*] and sorcery [*fjolkyngi*]. But many others learned much of it, and for this reason sorcery [*fjolkyngi*] was widespread and continued for a long time.

Ynglingasaga 7; my translation

Ynglingasaga 7 is a crucial text for the study of *seiðr*, as it provides both a wealth of detail and a degree of social orientation for its rituals. We can also speculate that *seiðr* was originally mentioned in Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni’s *Ynglingatal*, because the above prose seems to constitute a summary of the stanzas that Snorri does not directly cite (Tolley 1995a: 57). Óðinn’s powers are examined in the next chapter.

Seiðr appears occasionally in the rest of *Heimskringla*, in a series of incidents that are discussed individually below. *Volur* and other kinds of sorceresses are mentioned in *Ynglingasaga* (13f), while *seiðmenn* and male sorcerers appear in chapter 22 of the same saga, together with *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (35) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (62). In Oddr Snorrason's version of the latter story (27/35), the same idea is repeated, and many of the same traditions are also recounted in the *Historia Norvegiae.*

The sagas of Icelanders (the 'family sagas')

By far the greater part of our information on *seiðr* comes from the corpus of family sagas, and as such must be used with very great caution in any attempt to reconstruct genuine Viking-Age practices from stories written down (if not actually invented) several centuries later. The saga debate has been briefly summarised above, so here we can confine ourselves to an overview of the relevant sources themselves.

Of all the saga accounts that mention *seiðr*, one takes precedence due to the unparalleled detail of its description and its social context. This is contained in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, the saga of Eiríkr the Red which is one of our primary sources for the Norse explorations westwards to Greenland and the Atlantic coast of Canada. The text exists in two versions, contained in the Skálholtsbók and the Hauksbók, the former of which was published in a normalised edition by Storm in 1891 (this was the text employed by Strömbäck in 1935: 49–54). Both texts have been published in parallel by S. B. F. Jansson, and been translated a number of times. Given the central nature of the *Eiríks saga rauða* account, I reproduce it here in full in his edition of the Skálholtsbók text.

The following events take place in the very late tenth century at Herjolfsnes in Greenland, at the farm of Þorkell, the leading man in the district:

99. I þenna tima, uar hallæri mikit a grænlendi [.]
100. haufdu menn feingit litid. þeir sem i vedr ferd haufdu uerit enn sumir eigi aptr komnir.
101. sv kona uar i bygd er. þorbiorg. het. hun. var spa kona. hun. var kaullut litill volve.
102. hun. hafdi aatt ser. niv. systr. ok var hun. ein eptir. aa lifi.

103. þat var hattr. þorbiargar. a vetrvm. at hun for a ueiizlr ok budv menn henni heim. mest þeir er forvitni var a. um forlug sin. eda. at ferdir.
104. ok med þvi at. þorkell var þar mestr bondi þa. þotti til hanns koma. hvenær at vita letta mundi varani. þessv sem yfir stod.
105. þorkell bydr spakonv þangat ok er henni buin god vit taka. sem sidr var
106. til þa er vit þess haattar konu skylldi taka bvit var henni ha sætti ok lagt unndir hægindi. þar skylldi i vera hænsa fidri.
107. enn er. hun. kom vm kuelldit ok se madr er i moti henni uar senndr. þa var. hun suo buin at hun. hafdi yfir sier tygla mauttvl blann. ok var settr
108. steinum. allt i skaut ofan hun. hafdi a. haalsi ser gler taulr. hun hafdi. a haufdi lamb skinz kofra suartann ok vid innan kattar skinn huitt staf
109. hafdi hun. i henndi ok var.a. knappr hann uar buinn messingv. ok settum
110. steinum ofan vm knappinn hun. hafdi vm sik hnioskv linda ok var þar aa skiodu punngr mikill. varduetti hun þar i taufr þau er hun þvrfti til frodleiks at hafva.
111. hun hafdi kalf skinnz sko lodna a. fotum ok i þveingi langa ok sterkliga. latuns knappar. mikler. a enndvnvm.
112. hun hafdi a. haundvm ser katt skinnz glofa. ok uoru hvitir innan ok lodner.
113. Enn er hvn kom inn. þotti avllvm mavnnum skyll at velia henni sæmiligar kvedivr.
114. enn hun tok þui eptir sem henni uoru menn skapfelldir til.
115. Tok. þorkell. bonndi. i haunnd visennda konunni. ok leiddi hann hana til þess sætis. er henni var bvit.
116. þorkell. bad hana renna þar avgum yfir hiord ok hiv. ok hybyli.
117. hun var fa malvg vm allt.
118. bord voru vpp tekin um kvelldit. ok er fra þvi at. segia at spakonvnni var mat bvit.
119. henni var giorr grautr af kidia miolk enn til matar henni uoru buin hiortv ur allz konar kvikenndum. þeim sem þar. var. til.
120. hun hafdi messingar spon. ok hnif tannskeftan tui holkadann af eiri. ok var af brotinn. oddrinn.
121. Enn er bord uoru vpp tekin. gengr. þorkell bonndi firir. þorbiorrgv ok spyrr huersv henni virdizt þar hybyli. eda. hættir manna. eda. hersv fliotliga hann mun þess vis uerda er hann hefvir spurt eptir ok menn uilldv vita.

122. hun kvezt þat ecki mundv vpp bera fyrr enn vm morgvninn þa er hun hefdi sofot þar vm nottina.
123. Enn eptir a alidnvm degi var henni uettir sa vm bvningr. sem hun skylldi sein fremia.
124. bad hun fa sier konr þær. sem kynni frædi. þat er þyrfti til seidinnar
125. fremia ok uardlokr heita. enn þær knor funnduzt eigi þa uar at leitad um bæinn. ef nauckr kynni.
126. þa. svarar. Gvdridr. huerki er ek fiolkvnnig ne visennda kona. enn þo kenndi halldis fostra min. mer a. islanndi. þat frædi er hun kalladi vard lokr.
127. þorbiorg. svaradi. þa. ertu frodari enn ek ætladi.
128. Gvdridr. s. þetta er þesskonar frædi ok at ferli. at ek ætla i avngvm at beina at vera. þviat ek er kona kristin.
129. þorbiorn, suarar. svo mætti uerda at þu yrdir mavnnum at lidi. her vm
130. enn værir kona at verri enn vid. þorkel met ek at fa þa hluti her til er þarf.
131. þorkell herdir nu at gvdridi. enn hun kuezt mundv giora sem hann villdi.
132. slogv knor hring vm hverfis. enn. þorbiorg vppi a seid hiallinvm.
133. qvad. Gvdridr. þa kuædit. suo fagurt ok uel at eingi þottizt fyrr heyrt hafva med fegri ravst kvedit. sa er þar uar.
134. spakona. þackar henni kvædit. hun hafdi margar nattvrur higat att sott ok þotti fagurt at heyra. þat er kuedit var. er adr uilddi far oss snuazt ok oss avngua hlydni veita.
135. Enn mer erv nu margar þeir hluter aud synar. er aadr var bædi ek ok adrir dulder.
136. Enn ek kann þat at segia at hallæri þetta mvn ecki halldazt leingr. ok mvn batna arangr. sem uarar.
137. Sottar far þat sem leignt hefir legit mvn batna vonv bradara.
138. Enn þier. Gvdridr. skal ek launa i havnd lid sinni þat sem oss hafir af
139. stadit. þviat þin forlavg eru mer nu aull glaugg sæ þat muntu giaf ord fa hier. aa grænlanndi. er sæmiligazt er til þo at þier verdi þat eigi til langædar. þviat uegir þinir liggia vt til islanndz. ok mvm þar koma fra þier ætt bogi bædi mikill ok godr ok yfir þinvm ætt kvislvm mvn skina biartr geisli. ennda far nu uel ok heil. dottir min.
140. Sidan gengu menn at uisennda konunni. ok fretti hver eptir þvi sem mest
141. foruitni. var a var hun ok god af fra savgnvm geck þat ok litt i tavma. s. hun.

142. þessv næst var komit eptir henni af audrvm bæ ok for hun þa þanngat.
143. var. sennt eptir. þorbirni þui at hann uilldi eigi heima vera medan slik heidni var framan.
144. Vedradtta battnadi skiott. þegar er uora tok sem þorbiorg hafdi sagt.

At this time there was a great famine in Greenland. Those who had gone out hunting had caught little, and some never came back. In the Settlement there was a woman named Þorbiorg, who was a *spákona*; she was called *Lítilvolva* [‘Little-Volva’]. She had nine sisters, who had all been *spákonur*, and she was the only one still alive. It was Þorbiorg’s custom to spend the winter attending feasts, invited home mostly to those who were curious to know their own future or what the coming year would bring. As Þorkell was the leading farmer there, it was felt that it was up to him to find out when the bad times that had been weighing upon them would let up. Þorkell invited the *spákona* to visit, and a good welcome was prepared for her, as was the custom when a woman of this kind was received. A high-seat was prepared for her, and a cushion laid upon it; this was to be stuffed with hen’s feathers. When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue [or ‘black’] cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She had a staff in her hand, with a knob on it; it was fitted with brass and set with stones up around the knob. Around her waist she had a belt of tinder-wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In it she kept the charms (*taufr*) that she used for her sorcery [*fróðleikr*]. She had hairy calfskin shoes on her feet, with long, sturdy laces; they had great knobs of tin [or ‘pewter’ or ‘brass’] on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves, which were white inside and furry. When she came in, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, which she received according to her opinion of each person. Þorkell the farmer took the *vísendakona* by the hand, and led her to the seat that had been prepared for her. Þorkell then asked her to cast an eye over his flock, his household and his homestead; she had few words for all of it. Tables were set up in the evening, and it must now be told what food was prepared for the *spákona*. A porridge of kids’ milk was made for her, and for her meat the hearts of all the animals available there. She had a brass spoon and an ivory-handled knife clasped with copper [or ‘bronze’ or ‘brass’], and with the point broken off. Then when the

tables had been cleared away, Þorkell the farmer walked up to Þorbiorg and asked what she thought of what she had seen there and the conduct of the household, and how soon he could expect a reply to what he had asked after and which people wanted to know. She said that she would not reveal this until the morning, after she had spent a night there. Late the next day she was provided with the tools she needed to carry out her *seiðr*. She asked for women who knew the charms [*fræði*] necessary for carrying out *seiðr* and which are called *varðlok(k)ur*. But there were no such women to be found. Then they searched through the household, to see if there was anyone who knew [the charms]. Then Guðríðr answered, “I am neither skilled in sorcery [*fjolkynnig*] nor a *vísendakona*, but Halldís my foster-mother in Iceland taught me such charms [*fræði*] that she called *varðlok(k)ur*”. Þorbiorg answered, “Then you know more than I expected”. Guðríðr said, “These are the sort of charms [*fræði*] and proceedings in which I feel I want no part, for I am a Christian woman”. Þorbiorg answered, “It may be that you could help the people here by so doing, and you would be no worse a woman for that; but it is to Þorkell I must look to provide me with what I need”. Þorkell now pressed Guðríðr hard, until she said she would do as he wanted. Then the women formed a circle around the *seiðr*-platform [*seiðhjallr*] on top of which was Þorbiorg. Guðríðr then chanted the chants [*kvæði*] so beautifully and so well, that no-one there could say that they had heard anyone recite with a more lovely voice. The *spákona* thanked her for the chant and said that many spirits [*náttúrur*] had been drawn there who thought it beautiful to hear what had been chanted, “who before wanted to turn from us and refused to obey us; moreover many things are now clear to me which were earlier hidden both from me and from others. And I can tell you that this famine will not last longer than this winter, and that the season will mend when the spring comes. The sickness that has long troubled you will also improve sooner than expected. And you, Guðríðr, I will reward on the spot for the help we have had from you, for your fate is now very clear to me. You will make a match here in Greenland, the most honourable there is, though it will not last long, because your path lies out in Iceland, and there will spring from you a progeny both great and good, and over your line will shine a bright ray. Now fare you well, and health to you, my daughter”. Then people went up to the *vísendakona*, and each asked after that which they were most concerned to know; she gave them good answers, and

little that she had said was not fulfilled. Next she was sent for from another house, and so she went on her way. Then they sent for Þorbiorn, who did not wish to remain at home while such heathen things were going on. With the arrival of spring the weather soon improved, as Þorbiorg had said.

> *Eiríks saga rauða* 4; text from Skálholtsbók after Jansson 1944: 39–44; my translation, generally following Kunz 2000 and Jones 1961; translation includes amendments from the Hauksbók text

Female *seiðr*-workers are also mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* (76), *Egills saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (59), *Kormáks saga* (6) and *Landnámabók* (194). A Sámi *volva* performs *seiðr* in *Vatnsdæla saga* (10; an episode also glossed in *Landnámabók*), a rather late source that must be used with particular caution (see Strömbäck 1935: 69–75). *Seiðmenn* appear again in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (18) and *Laxdæla saga* (35); in *Njáls saga* (30) a man has his spear enchanted by *seiðr.* Each of these, and other appearances by sorcerers of various kinds, are taken up in detail over the following chapters.

The fornaldarsögur (‘sagas of ancient times’, ‘legendary sagas’)

Among the later sagas, principally concerned with heroic or mythical stories of a kind far more removed from any Viking-Age reality than the family sagas, there are also a number of references to *seiðr*.

Some of these are extensive, and they include one in particular which has in the past been taken together with *Eiríks saga rauða* as a ‘type example’ for a *seiðr* performance, from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3); this is reproduced in full in the next chapter. A second extended passage (*ibid*: 32ff) also concerns *seiðr*, but in the context of its use on the battlefield; this is presented and discussed in chapter 6. Composed in the fourteenth century and only preserved in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century and later, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a problematic source – not least because despite its late date, like *Volsunga saga* it concerns some of the earliest of the heroic tales. It also contains a number of parallels with Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*.

Strömbäck (1935: 86f) believed that the *seiðr* elements in *Hrólfs saga kraka* were almost certainly medieval inventions, whereas the descriptions of shape-shifting and ‘totemistic’ relationships with animals were more likely to be of ancient origin. However, this can be reassessed in the light of the broader

context of *seiðr* as battlefield magic, which I believe it possible to establish and which I discuss below. While there is no doubt that the saga is a highly problematic source, it is striking how well its descriptions of combat sorcery fit other evidence that is independent of the text. We shall explore this in subsequent chapters.

Among the later sources, references to *seiðr* and its practitioners also appear in *Norna-Gests þáttr*, *Friðþjófs saga frøkna*, *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar*, *Gongu-Hrólfs saga*, *Sogubrot af fornkonungum*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingassonar*, *Volsunga saga*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Hálfdanar saga Bronufóstra*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, *Sorla saga sterka*, *Nikulás saga leikara*, *Ektors saga*, and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. The term *seiðskratti* also appears in *Hálfdanar saga Barkarsonar* (8), but this is a very late source, perhaps even post-medieval.

All these episodes, together with many more that refer to different kinds of sorcery and other activities related to these practices, are discussed in chapter 3.

In addition to these, *seiðr* is also mentioned in a number of sources as late as the Reformation, and on into the early modern period. These can be seen more in terms of developing folklore and the longevity of words and concepts in the Icelandic language. These sources are mentioned in passing by Strömbäck, and many of them are collected by Almqvist (2000: 261ff).

The biskupasögur (Bishops' sagas')

From the contemporary sagas, that is those of similar date to the family sagas but describing the period of their composition, we also find a brief reference to something that may be a *seiðr* performance. In *Kristni saga* and the related text *Þorvalds þáttr víðforla* appears an episode in which two Christians are disturbed by the wailing of a pagan 'priestess', a *gyðja* of the type that we have seen above. She is sitting on a raised altar, apparently to make a sacrifice (*blót*). *Seiðr* is not mentioned by name, but the implied platform is strikingly similar to those mentioned in connection with sorcery, and it may be that this passage is describing such a ritual.

The early medieval Scandinavian law codes

An important category of sources for the contemporary reality of *seiðr*, as opposed to its literary construction in the sagas, are the early medieval

Scandinavian law codes. Strömbäck (1935: 106f) found two references to this practice. The first derives from a collection of royal and episcopal court records from 1281, preserved in a manuscript from *c.*1480. In one passage it is stated that,

… ef þat verdr kent korllvm eda konum at þau seide eda magne troll vpp at rida monnum eda bvfe … þa skal flytia utt aa sio og sockua til gruna. og aa kongur og biskup hvern penning fiar þeirra … if it is discovered that a man or woman has performed *seiðr*, or raised a great troll to ride people or animals … then they shall be driven out beyond the parish bounds, and forfeit all their property to the king and bishop Dipl. Isl. II: 223; my translation

There is some comparison here with the Norwegian Gulaþing laws cited below (NGL I: 19, 182), which also mention raising trolls by sorcery, but Strömbäck (1935: 106f) considers that the act of *seiðr* and the act of summoning are separate events.

The second mention of *seiðr* in the legal codes comes from an elaboration made *c.*1326 to the twelfth-century *Skriptaboð Þorláks biskups helga*, in which Bishop Jón Halldórsson sets severe penalties for:

sitr madr vti til fordleiks. eda fremr madr galldra. eda magnar madr seid. eda heidni.

a person who sits outside to make sorcery (*fróðleikr*), or a person who performs *galdr*, or a person who makes powerful *seiðr*, or heathenism.

Dipl. Isl. I: 240ff, my translation

Neither of these notices tells us anything about the practice of sorcery itself, but its concept – and, presumably, reality – was clearly still current in the period of the sagas' composition.

Non-Scandinavian sources

Seiðr is mentioned explicitly in only two non-Norse sources. The first of these is *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, which as the name implies is an Icelandic version of a tale that derives from mainland Europe. The term is thus used to translate what was originally something different. The relevant passage is reviewed in chapter 3.

The second reference comes from *Upphaf Rómverja*, an introduction to *Rómverja sogur* from the early fourteenth century (or perhaps earlier) that deals with the origins of Rome (Almqvist 2000: 252f). In the story of Romulus and Remus we find the words *seiðgaldr* and *seiðmagnan*, both of which are unique. The former represents a new kind of magic term and the second would seem to mean 'great *seiðr*'. They are clearly translations of Latin words, though which these might be is uncertain. The late date and context renders them largely uninformative for our purposes, but the concept of *seiðgaldr* is intriguing.

Although it does not mention the term by name, there is also a crucial reference to something that probably was a *seiðr* performance in a rather unusual source from Ireland. The *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 'The Wars of the Irish with the Foreigners [*i.e.* the Norse]', is a series of retrospective chronicles of the Viking Age written for the great-grandson of Brian Bórama, Muirchertach Ua Briain, who died in 1119 (see Ní Mhaonaigh 2001: 101). It exists in several manuscripts, in three of which we find a single brief reference to the sorcerous activities of a Scandinavian woman called Otta. She is described as the wife of a Viking chieftain named Turges – probably an Irish reading of the Norse name Þurgestr (Ó Corráin 2001: 19) – who temporarily gained control of several key centres in Connacht during a raid sometime in the period 838–845.

The oldest version of the *Cogadh* is contained in a single folio of the *Book of Leinster* (see the introduction to Todd's edition), and this fragment also contains the most complete note on the ritual. After listing the settlements occupied by Turges' Vikings, the chronicler comments:

Tuc Cluain mic nois da mnai. Is and ra bered a frecartha daltoir in tempoil móir. Otta ainm mnaa Turgeis.

Cluain mic nois [Clonmacnoise] was taken by his wife. It was on the altar of the great church she used to give her answers. Otta was the name of the wife of Turgeis.

Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, Leinster fragment (Ms. L): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 226

The Dublin version of the manuscript has it slightly differently:

… ocus is and dobered Ota ben Turges a huricli ar altoir Cluana mic Nois.

… and the place where Ota, the wife of Turges, used to give her audience was upon the altar of Cluain Mic Nois [Clonmacnoise].

Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, Dublin manuscript (Ms. D): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 13

The Brussels manuscript of the *Cogadh* has a third variant of the woman's name, where it is given as Otur – perhaps in reality she was named Auðr. Little work has been done on this episode, though in 1960 W. E. D. Allen interpreted 'Ota' as being a member of a foreign embassy to the Irish Vikings. Again, the *Cogadh* will be taken up in the next chapter.

Seiðr in research

Having reviewed *seiðr* in the sources, we can now look to an overview of scholarly studies in this field. Though it means losing a little momentum in the pace of our argument, the work set out in the following chapters demands that we first make a brief survey of the ways in which Nordic sorcery has been taken up by previous researchers. The notes below are not intended as an exhaustive synthesis, and a great many more works are taken up as appropriate throughout the book. Archaeological studies which have tried to identify aspects of *seiðr* through the material record are treated separately in chapters 3 and 5.

Probably the earliest work to specifically discuss the role of *seiðr* in Norse religion appeared in 1877, written by Johan Fritzner, and it is significant that even at this initial stage of tentative interpretation we find these rituals being connected both with Sámi religion and the broader framework of shamanic belief systems. Fritzner's paper is primarily a discussion of Sámi religion in a comparative context (a subject more fully explored in chapter 4 below), and although he devotes some space to the possible transfer of specific divinities from one culture to another, the bulk of his detailed discussion is concerned with sorcery. As we have seen above, the problem of distinguishing between the different forms of Old Norse magic has a long research history, and we can note that even in this first account Fritzner interweaves his discussion of *seiðr* and *gandr* without distinction (1877: 164–83, 188–200). Nevertheless, all the key elements are present in his analysis, including the use of staffs, the *seiðhjallr* and the metaphor of 'riding' – to all of which we shall return below – as well as the important relationship between human agents of sorcery and the various supernatural powers with which they communicate (the *valkyrjur*, *dísir* and so on). Most crucially of all, he addresses the use of these forms of sorcery for aggressive ends, with a discussion on magical projectiles (Fritzner 1877: 185ff, 208–10) – a subject avoided by the majority of subsequent *seiðr*-scholars, as we shall see.

Fritzner's important essay stimulated a small but steady interest in the trance rituals of the Norse, resulting in a suite of publications over the next few years that included Bang's 1879 study of *Voluspá* in the context of Græco-

Roman oracular traditions, and Bugge's arguments for the Christian overtones of Óðinn on the tree (published in 1889 but written in the early 1880s).

The first specific study of *seiðr* came in 1892 with Finnur Jónsson's landmark paper in an Icelandic Festschrift to Páli Melsteð. As with Fritzner's work, 'Um galdra, seið, seiðmenn og völur' set out a number of key aspects of *seiðr* and other forms of Old Norse magic that would come to be overlooked by the majority of twentieth-century researchers. In particular, Finnur focused on the practitioners of this sorcery, and made the first attempt to compile a terminology for them (*ibid*: 7ff). Crucially, he recognised that the different terms referred to different types of sorcerer – a realisation with far-reaching implications as we shall see below. He further addressed the performance and material culture of *seiðr*, reviewing the sources for *seiðr* platforms, staffs and various forms of songs used in the rituals (*ibid*: 17ff). This was also the first work to attempt to carefully distinguish the dual complexes of *seiðr* and *galdr*.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, these ideas were spreading into other areas of Old Norse studies, for example to the analysis of dreams and their significance in the sagas (*e.g.* Henzen 1890); these preoccupations naturally also reflected contemporary developments in psychology and the interpretation of dream symbolism. The *draumkonur* – the strange spirit-women who appear as harbingers of ill-fortune and advice – and other inhabitants of dreams were compared to the soul-travelling agents of *seiðr*, and began to be linked to ideas about the personification of luck and the nature of the soul itself.

In 1902 Hugo Gering published the first major study of the new century, with his book on prophecy and magic in Nordic prehistory, in which the disparate strands of the *seiðr* complex began to be drawn together. The world of Óðinnic sorcery, the activities of the *volur* and others of their kind, the travelling soul and the power of dreams, all were seen to be connected, though as yet no overall structure could be proposed. Significantly, in this as in all earlier works no attempt had been made to integrate 'magic' into the wider social framework.

In the same year, 1902, an anonymous author contributed a paper to a German journal of sexuality, in which s/he discussed possible 'contra-sexual' elements in Norse sorcery. These included the *ergi* complex – the sexually

charged state of dishonour which as we have seen from *Ynglingasaga* attached to men who performed *seiðr.*

Other authors focused on elements of this new sorcerous pattern that Gering had identified. Karl Krohn (1906: 158) argued that *seiðr* was the model for the Sámi shamanic rituals, and in 1909 Axel Olrik published a short paper on its ritual architecture, focusing on the elevation of the performer. In the same year Westermarck included a brief note on the sexual aspects of *seiðr* in his great treatise on the origins of morality (1909). In 1911, Wolf von Unwerth produced his thesis on Óðinn and death cults among the northern Germans and the Sámi, and the Nordic soul conceptions were taken up again in Ida Blum's thesis from 1912. This latter work looked nominally at *Schutzgeister*, 'helping spirits', but in fact focuses on the *fylgjur, hamingjur* and dream beings of different kinds.

The first major twentieth-century works specifically focusing on Norse magic appeared during the First World War. In 1916 B. M. Ólsen and L. F. Läffler considered the puzzling strophe 155 from *Hávamál*, which seems to refer to the mobile souls of sorcerers in trance, and to which we will return several times in this book. Specific aspects of the *seiðr* ritual were also taken up by N. Å. Nielsen (1917) in two essays on runic inscriptions with magical formulae designed to protect the monuments on which they were carved. He argued that the 'curse' inscribed on the stones was intended to harm a (presumedly male) desecrator's social standing by equating his actions with *seiðr*, in view of the latter's strong associations with effeminacy.

Meissner's piece from the same year, 'Ganga til fréttar', is a complex paper, philological in inspiration but nevertheless concerned more with Viking-Age conditions than with literary constructions. Again, this is in marked contrast to more recent work on the subject. Superceded by the publications of Strömbäck and others, Meissner remains nonetheless a fundamental source for the history of research in this field. Much the same can be said of the book produced in 1918 by Linderholm in *Svenska Landsmål*, which was intended to be the first part of a multi-volume work on Nordic magic from early prehistory to the coming of Christianity. Devoted primarily to pre-Viking ritual, the first volume was all that ever appeared but it did include a brief attempt to understand the complex socio-sexual phenomenon of *ergi* that will be taken up in the next chapter (*ibid*: 89f).

The inconclusive nature of this early work on sorcery may have been a contributing factor to the re-incorporation of *seiðr* research into a broader frame of reference in the 1920s. This first appeared in 1922 with Noreen's study of poetic forms, in which he raised the question of insult poetry which was often used as a channel for allegations of *ergi*.

In 1923, as we have seen Ivar Lindquist published a book-length work on *Galdrar*, but with a narrower range than the title implies. Focusing partly on Old High German sources such as the Merseburg charms, and partly on runic inscriptions, Lindquist only briefly touched on *seiðr* itself. However, already we see Fritzner's connection with circumpolar religion being perpetuated, as *seiðr tydligen var ett slags sjamanism* ('clearly was a sort of shamanism'; *ibid*: 178).

In a rather simplified interpretation, *Voluspá* again formed the central motif for Höckert's work on the Vanir from 1926, which was so heavily criticised that its author published a sequel in 1930 to answer his detractors. *Seiðr* is mentioned relatively little, but the small amount of space devoted to it contains much of interest. Here again, for example, we see an early emphasis on violent magic, on this occasion in relation to the Vanir's *vígspá*, the 'war-spell' (Höckert 1926: 41f). Interestingly too, he sees the entirety of the prophecy in the *Voluspá* poem in the context of a *seiðr* performance, and as a ritual rather than ecstatic event (Höckert 1930: 72f). One of the main points of conflict between Höckert and the critics was his combination of *seiðr* and *útiseta* as part of the same phenomenon (*ibid*: 100–4). Wessén claimed that the sources showed these to be two quite separate practices, identifying one very important difference between them that has been only rarely taken up:

Sejd var åtföljd av en mycket stor apparat, en mängd ceremonier måste iakttagas, särskilt sång av galdrar och *varðlokkur*; det var därför alltid flera som måste hjälpas åt … I motsats härtill var *útiseta* en form av magi, som synes ha utövats utan några yttre trollmedel. Det viktiga är, att man, av källorna att döma, vid *útiseta* alltid befann sig ensam.

Seiðr was accompanied by a very large apparatus, many ceremonies had to be observed, special songs of *galdrar* and *varðlokkur*; this was why several people always had to help out … By contrast *útiseta* was a form of magic that appears to have been performed without external sorcerous equipment. The

important thing is that, to judge from the sources, in *útiseta* one always found oneself alone.

Wessén 1927: 74; my translation

In the same year Reichborn-Kjennerud presented the first volume in his review of Nordic witchcraft, published a few months later in 1928. Eventually stretching to five volumes of which the last would not appear until after the war, this work consists primarily of short essays on individual subjects, arranged thematically in a broad chronological scheme. In part one Reichborn-Kjennerud briefly reviewed a similar range of supernatural beings as Blum had done in 1912, but created a new conceptual category within which they could be compared. In a section entitled *sjelslivets åpenbaringsformer*, 'manifestations of the life of the soul' (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1928: 33–45) we again encounter dreams, *fylgjur* and *hamningjar*, but for the first time they are discussed alongside beliefs in shape-shifting and lycanthropy, and beings such as the *mara* or Nightmare. This was an important breakthrough in the understanding of the socio-psychological background against which later studies of *seiðr* would be set. Reichborn-Kjennerud also elaborated Finnur Jónsson's categories of sorcerers, but with a focus on what he called 'the evil eye' and 'the evil tongue' (*ibid*: 63–70). Once again, the idea of sorcerous, projected violence was made explicit. *Seiðr* itself receives little more than a page of discussion, as does *galdr* (*ibid*: 79–82), but in each case the author draws out key aspects such as the payment conventionally received for performances, the existence of sorcerous duels, and again, the projection of misfortune through these forms of magic.

Shamanism was once again taken up in relation to Óðinn by Rolf Pipping in 1928(b), in a short but important pamphlet. Here he argued for links with Finnish religion in the story of the god's self-sacrifice on the world-tree, interpreting Óðinn's hanging as a means to see into another world, and to obtain mystical knowledge in a state of trance.

In 1930, Konrad Jarausch published a long paper on magic in the sagas, in which he made an interesting attempt to isolate the different types of sorcerers described. In the second and third sections of his article Jarausch also tried to analyse magic-working by function and medium (*ibid*: 247–66), and to relate sorcery to the wider framework of cult. Much of his argument is rather

abbreviated and the paper is essentially a kind of blueprint for future research, but it would be several years before anyone else approached Nordic magic with such precision.

Old Norse sorcery was briefly taken up again by Eggers in his 1932 thesis on magical objects in the Icelandic sources, though the paper focuses on more functional artefacts such as weapons, rather than the apparatus of witchcraft. In 1933 van Hamel returned to the subject of Óðinn on the tree, last raised by Pipping, but in many respects this again avoided a direct confrontation with the ritual itself. The following year, *seiðr* was also briefly treated in Aakjær's discussion of sacral place-names, which were interpreted as the location of ritual acts.

From 1934 until the end of the decade followed the single greatest concentration of research in this field up until the present day. Three scholars – an Austrian and two Swedes – each produced a book either wholly or partly devoted to *seiðr*, and in doing so shaped the entire framework of discussion on Nordic sorcery for the remainder of the century. This was also the point at which modern political considerations entered the debate, with almost entirely negative consequences, as we shall see.

The first of the three works was published in 1934 by Otto Höfler, a Viennese historian of religions who held a *Dozentur* in his native country but taught at Uppsala. His book, *Kultische Geheimbunde der Germanen*, was intended to be a work in several parts but the first volume was all that ever appeared. This was devoted to what he called *das germanische Totenheer*, the 'army of the dead' which is found in many forms including the 'Wild Hunt' of Óðinn, and which Höfler saw as the mythological reflection of real warrior fraternities operating in the Iron Age among the Germanic peoples (see Kershaw 2000 for a critical review of the concept). It is in many ways a work of brilliance, collecting a vast range of material, sorting and re-interpreting it to produce a unifying model for ancient Scandinavian military ideology and its place in society. Amongst various topics, Höfler discusses the idea of demonic and animal figures in symbolic aggressive contexts, the masking traditions of Europe and figures such as the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* who appear to have been some kind of 'totemic' warrior elite connected to the cult of Óðinn. A discussion on shape-changing runs throughout, and indeed Höfler developed this further in an article two years later (1936). His work drew heavily on

folkloristics, and among its important aspects is an emphasis on what later writers would call the ‘social embeddedness’ of ritual, and the manner in which vital elements of the Vikings’ belief system saturated everyday activities. Höfler applied this reasoning in particular to the prosecution of warfare. It is true that he devotes very little space to *seiðr*, but in this case the terminology is less important than his understanding of the social dimension of magic.

While Höfler was working on his military fraternities, during the early thirties an Uppsala scholar was preparing what still remains the absolute fundament of all modern work on Nordic sorcery. In 1935 Dag Strömbäck published his monumental doctoral thesis, entitled simply *Sejd*. Even now, over eighty years after its publication, this work still stands unsurpassed in the breadth of its scholarship and critical reflection. Its status is confirmed by the decision to reissue it in a new edition in 2000 on the 100th anniversary of Strömbäck’s birth, a step taken not merely as an honorific but with the explicit objective of bringing the work to a new audience.

Strömbäck was the first to conduct a systematic survey of the Icelandic textual material, paying particular attention to the family sagas, *Landnámabók*, and the *fornaldarsögur*. He also made a further review of references to *seiðr* in texts dealing with a later period, including the Sturlunga cycle and the Bishops’ sagas (*Biskupasögur*). He was one of the first to realise that while the sagas are a very poor source indeed for the higher levels of pre-Christian religion in a formal sense – the cults of the gods, the social functionaries of religion, and the afterlife – they are a mine of information about popular belief. Strömbäck’s work on *Sejd* was undertaken at a time when others were reviving the late nineteenth-century interest in the Vikings’ interpretation of dreams (*e.g.* Kelchner 1935), and it was in this area that he, correctly in my opinion, identified the key elements of the written sources: “fate, dreams and premonitions, fetches and shape-shifting, the unquiet dead and demonic beings, sorcery, curses, people of power and clairvoyance, enchanted weaponry or protective amulets and armour, customs of fostership and oath-taking, rites of office and the judiciary, battle customs and mortuary behaviour” (Strömbäck 1935: 3; my translation).

Crucially, it was Strömbäck who developed the shamanic interpretation of *seiðr* to its fullest extent at that time, making extensive comparisons with Sámi

religion and also the circumpolar ethnographies. We shall return to Strömbäck's book throughout the following chapters.

The third cornerstone for *seiðr* research appeared at the very end of the decade. In 1939 a historian of religions at Lund University, Åke Ohlmarks, published *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus*, partly based on the controversial thesis that he had defended two years earlier. Taking a broad, circumpolar perspective, Ohlmarks examined the phenomenon of 'sub-arctic' shamanism, looking especially at helping spirits and the role of women in the rituals. His final chapter dealt solely with *seiðr*, and it is effectively in preparation for this that the arguments of his earlier chapters are built up (later the same year he extrapolated much of this in a separate article). Of the three great works of the 1930s, Ohlmarks' is the one that has least stood the test of time, but this depends primarily on his racist attitudes towards the peoples of the far north, and his stubborn promotion of 'arctic hysteria' as the defining factor in the development of shamanism. As we shall see in chapter 5, this has long been discredited as part of the general folklore of early twentieth-century racial biology. However, where Ohlmarks broke new ground was in his detailed relation of the Nordic world to that of the Siberian cultures, and his recognition of the significance of female ritual domains (the 'femininity' of *seiðr* had long been obvious to scholars, but few had thought to consider it in depth). Whereas Strömbäck approached *seiðr* first and then tried to explain it, Ohlmarks looked at shamanism and then sought to say if and where Nordic sorcery fitted into its typological scheme. His work was also highly contentious, in that he set himself directly, and with great acrimony, against both Fritzner's and Strömbäck's interpretations. Ohlmarks rejected any Sámi affiliations for the *seiðr* ritual, on the grounds that it did not involve 'true ecstasy' and was in fact more typical of Central Asian shamanism. We shall examine these ideas below.

In late 1939 with the outbreak of war, everything changed in *seiðr* studies as in the rest of the world. The political overtones that some had sought in the study of Nordic ecstasy cults suddenly became explicit in the apparatus of archaeological propaganda set up by the German regime. The 'Blood and Soil' mysticism of the Nazis is well-known and need not be discussed here, but the extent of the National Socialists' commitment to a state-controlled ideological agenda for archaeology should be emphasised: two government agencies were

set up to oversee the political appropriation of the discipline, including one run by the SS; between 1933 and 1935 eight new professorships were created in Germanic prehistory; funding for excavations was made available on a scale unrivalled elsewhere in the world, and new museums were set up across the Reich. Infusing most aspects of this work was a politically-constructed, mendacious vision of the warrior Viking hero and the mystical power of Óðinn (see Arnold & Haßmann 1995; Müller-Wille 1996; Haßmann 2000; Price 2004c; Pringle 2006).

For the study of *seiðr*, the man chiefly responsible for bringing this under a National Socialist shadow was Otto Höfler. It does not seem to have been a coincidence that he published his great work on military fraternities the year after the Nazis came to power in Germany, and as the thirties progressed he actively embraced their ideas. In 1939 he published a short pamphlet on the 'political achievement' of the Migration Period, which dovetailed conveniently with the Nazis' views on ethnic transportation and *Lebensraum*, and by the early 1940s Höfler had become a member of the SSAhnenerbe division under Himmler's direct command. Early in the war he was ordered to prepare a memorandum on the state of morale in Scandinavia, drawing on his experiences in Uppsala. In this document he advocated winning over leading Nordic intellectuals "*für einen freien ehrenvollen Dienst zu einem großgermanischen Reich*", 'to render free and honourable service for a Pangermanic Empire', which would work towards "*eine germanische Zukunft Europas*", 'a Germanic future for Europe' (Jakubowski-Tiessen 1994: 135; Müller-Wille 1996: 170). That Höfler understood the popular resistance to this, and very clearly perceived the nature of the side he had chosen, is revealed later in the same document when he predicts what would happen if his strategies of cultural persuasion should fail:

Andernfalls können wir die Skandinaver möglicherweise niederhalten, nie gewinnen. Dann aber werden sie stets auf die Angelsachsentum hoffen und warten.

Otherwise we may be able to subjugate the Scandinavians, but never win them over. In such a case, however, they will always found their hopes on the Anglo-Saxons and wait.

Otto Höfler, cited by Jakubowski-Tiessen 1994: 135

In 1943 Höfler was appointed to head the Wissenschaftliche Institut in København, which had been founded two years earlier following the German conquest of Denmark (Haßmann 2000: 101–4 describes the archaeological measures taken by the Nazis in the Nordic countries). Following his orders, he continued to promote the prehistoric 'continuity' of Germanic culture in the North, right to the end of the war.

During the de-Nazification proceedings after the German surrender, like many of the Ahnenerbe personnel Höfler managed to avoid serious recriminations, but he bore the imprint of his SS uniform for the rest of his life. He lived until 1987, but never wholly regained the personal credibility he had lost (at least internationally) with the defeat of the Nazis. Höfler's academic work is in a sense more problematic than his personal reputation. On the one hand its subject matter could hardly have fitted better with Nazi ideology, dealing as it did with secret military brotherhoods of berserkers, bound by mystic rites in the service of Óðinn. However, this does not mean that he was necessarily wrong about the Viking Age. The direction of Höfler's research was deliberate in the political climate of the times, but its actual content is generally free from such bias and is indeed of serious quality. Höfler's work is still very relevant today, albeit an uneasy read in view of the context in which it was written. With specific regard to Nordic sorcery, Höfler was probably the last to have tried to combine these strands of Viking-Age belief into a coherent whole. Because of his political choices, beyond the circle of those who specifically work on Viking-Age religion Höfler's research is now almost completely unknown, and few archaeologists specialising in the period have heard of him.

Although by no means equally compromised, Åke Ohlmarks also more than flirted with the far right and paid the price after the war, though his problems seemed to stem more from his prickly personality than anything else (see Åkerlund 2006 for a perceptive account of his politics). In both Uppsala and Lund a number of student societies had flourished during the thirties, supporting a broadly pro-German political stance which in many cases continued after the commencement of hostilities in Europe (the academic atmosphere at this time is well described by Baudou in his biography of Gustaf Hallström, 1997: 231–63). Ohlmarks had been involved with such organisations in Lund, and in 1933 he took a lecturing post in Tübingen a few

months after the Nazis came to power. A year later he returned to Sweden and wrote his doctoral thesis, which was presented in 1937 and met with a barrage of criticism. Angry at this, in 1941 Ohlmarks emigrated *to* Germany, eventually moving to Berlin. This combination of factors not surprisingly resulted in a kind of academic banishment, which only worsened after the war. Ohlmarks seems to have been especially quick to take affront, and in a climate of genuine opposition this descended into paranoia. Near the end of his life, he wrote about this period in his autobiography *Doktor i Lund* (1980, subtitled 'a book on academic intrigues'), a fascinating if rather disturbing blend of obsession and conspiracy theories in which all the major *seiðr* and shamanism researchers of the thirties play leading roles. Ohlmarks does not seem to have mellowed with age, and the tone of the book can be judged from the way he refers to his academic rivals with a variety of patronising epithets – Noreen is the 'Traitor' (*Förrädaren*), Strömbäck is the 'Hater' (*Hataren*), and so on – while the university community in Lund is run by 'Gangsters' and 'Terrorists' (one can note that both terms were used frequently by the Nazis).

If his memoirs are any guide to his character, it is hardly surprising that Ohlmarks wandered into an ever-deepening professional wilderness in the post-war years. This was more than a personal misfortune, because the political vacillations that he shared with Höfler and others ensured that a stigma of Nazi associations clung to the mystical dimensions of Old Norse religion for decades after the war. This is the main reason why the work of Strömbäck (who had no such sympathies) and his contemporaries was never taken up into the mainstream of Viking scholarship. It remained known to academics, mainly philologists and historians of religions, but the whole complex of *seiðr* and its practitioners was not incorporated into the syntheses of the Viking world that began to appear regularly from the fifties onwards.

The weight of this loss is all the heavier because the thirties and forties were otherwise a period of great productivity in research on Nordic sorcery. This can partly be explained by the expedient enthusiasm for Viking mysticism discussed above, but it should be stressed that the political climate that encouraged particular subjects did not necessarily mean that the works in question were deliberately distorted to promote a party line.

Höfler, Strömbäck and Ohlmarks were certainly not the only ones working on *seiðr* in the thirties. In 1931 the Dutch historian of religions Jan de Vries

published a book on Óðinn controversially seen as a fertility deity, with several discussions of sorcery in this context, together with another paper the same year on the role of magic in the Norse cosmogony. He followed this in 1934 with a paper on Óðinn on the tree, and the next year – simultaneously with Strömbäck's *Sejd* – de Vries published the first edition of his monumental *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*.

Also in 1935 Nils Lid published a short piece on conceptions of Nordic sorcery, and Magnus Olsen compared sorcerous attributes between gods and mortals. In 1936 N. Beckman contributed a note on *ergi*. During the war years, the majority of work in this field was undertaken by German scholars. In 1941 Kiessling published *Zauberei in der germanischen Volksrechten* which included a brief section on *seiðr*, but unfortunately I have been unable to trace a copy of this work.

One notable exception to the pattern was the Cambridge doctoral thesis published in 1943 by Hilda Ellis (later Davidson), *The road to Hel*, a complex and much underestimated book that is still the best single treatment of Viking-Age responses to dying and the dead, despite being out of print for more than seventy years. The discussion of *seiðr* and possible shamanic elements in Old Norse religion that she would go on to develop twenty years later can be seen in embryo here (*ibid*: 124–7), set against a pioneering discussion of the soul with ground-breaking implications that have not all been absorbed by students of Viking religion even today. In particular, and like Fritzner, she focused on elements of violent magic-working which would remain almost ignored in subsequent decades.

The following year, 1944, Nils Lid returned to sorcery with an effective paper on magical projectiles in the context of *gandr*, which more than a decade on would result in his major book on the subject. Shortly after Lid's work, Wilhelm Muster produced a thesis on shamanism in the sagas (1947), but despite its promising subject matter he confined himself solely to German translations of the texts, and also to German folklore traditions. In essentially ignoring the primary Norse material, a valuable opportunity was sadly missed. Later the same year, Folke Ström published a book on the supernatural powers of the dead in relation to Óðinn's communication with them, echoing much of Ellis' work. 1947 was also the year in which Åke Ohlmarks returned briefly to the study of *seiðr*, in a section of his *Svenskarnas tro genom årtusendena*, a

survey of Nordic religion for a popular audience. The book includes some twenty pages on shamanism, mostly excerpted from Ohlmarks' earlier work and comparing Óðinn to the 'Scythian shaman-gods' (*ibid*: 241–60).

In 1949, Carl-Martin Edsman took up the possible shamanic overtones of the Norse cosmology, in particular the nine worlds beneath Yggdrasill's roots that are mentioned in *Voluspá*. In comparing them with Celtic mythology and other sources, he concluded that no such associations could be sustained (*ibid*: 53).

From the 1870s to the 1940s we can thus trace a group of key themes in ••research related to *seiðr*: Óðinn's self-sacrifice on Yggdrasill possible •••initiation rituals dreams and their inhabitants communication with the dead •••spirits and the nature of the soul violent sorcery witchcraft connections •between Norse and Sámi religion *seiðr* as some form of shamanism For studies of Old Norse magic, the 1950s began retrospectively with Nils Lid's book on *Trolldom*, which collected a number of his earlier articles. These were devoted primarily to folkloristic surveys from later periods but also included brief notices on *seiðr*. In 1951 N. C. Brøgger returned to *seiðr* as originally a Vanir practice, and proposed that it was a means of summoning either Freyja or other deities from this family. Some of this reasoning is strained, for example in the argument that Þorbiorg in *Eiríks saga rauða* is "clearly" present as Freyja's representative, but like many of his predecessors he also reasserted the shamanic overtones of the rituals. In this he cited parallels especially among the Canadian and Greenland Inuit, working from Knud Rasmussen's findings which had then been recently published (*ibid*: 48–52).

An important work on female supernatural beings, several of them operating within the overall complex of sorcery, was published by Ström in 1954. His *Diser, nornor, valkyrjor* remains a standard work on these creatures, supplemented by his *Kulturhistorisk lexikon* entries from 1958 and 1960.

In 1957 the second edition of de Vries' *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* appeared, extensively revised and with an expanded section on *seiðr*. Although it was revised again in 1970, with fewer changes, this work remains even now the single most comprehensive study of Norse religion, at over 1000 pages of outstanding scholarship. Together with Strömbäck's work, it provides the best modern overview of Nordic sorcery and is referenced extensively throughout the following chapters.

A major figure entered the sorcery debate in 1959, when Georges Dumézil criticised shamanic interpretations of *seiðr*, though strangely without reference to either Strömbäck or Ohlmarks. An entire chapter of his *Les dieux des Germains* was devoted to magic – significantly discussed together with war – but the general framework of these practices is only reviewed briefly.

From the late 1950s and onwards for just over twenty years, a steady stream of short notices of relevance to the study of *seiðr* appeared in what is still the most ambitious publishing project ever undertaken for the medieval North, the *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*. Some 22 volumes were produced between 1956 and 1978, which included expert analyses of Nordic sorcery from many different viewpoints. The entries for Óðinn, *seiðr* and the other magics, the different kinds of human sorcerers, most of the supernatural creatures involved in these rituals, and many more are taken up below.

The shamanic framework for the interpretation of *seiðr* became fully-developed in the 1960s, a time in which discussions of altered states of consciousness found a particularly receptive audience. At the beginning of the decade Vilhelm Kiil published an excellent paper on the special platforms used in the rituals (1960), which he followed two years later with one of the first attempts to discuss *seiðr* in terms of sexual performance. In 1961 Folke Ström also produced the first edition of his *Nordisk hedendom*, which included an entire chapter on *seiðr* and other forms of magic.

In 1964, Hilda Ellis Davidson returned to *seiðr* in her book *Gods and myths of northern Europe*. Discussing the rituals in the context of both Freyja and Óðinn (*ibid*: 117– 23, 141–9), she was the first post-war scholar to go back to the work of Strömbäck and Ohlmarks, and to propose a truly developed shamanic context for Viking sorcery. Over the following thirty years she extended this line of argument in several other works, including syntheses (1967: ch. 6; 1982: 45f, 93, 109ff; 1988: 155–62; 1993: 69, 76ff, 136ff, 159), studies of Óðinn (1972), the use of sorcery for aggressive ends (1973), and shape-changing (1978). Her research remains among the best published in this field, and is taken up below.

Just as Ellis Davidson produced her great synthesis in 1964, in the same year E. O. G. Turville-Petre published his similarly monumental *Myth and religion of the North*. It does not include a specific study of *seiðr*, but treats it

in relation to the gods, especially Óðinn. Despite its strong focus on the more formalised ‘religion’ of the period, together with de Vries’ work this also remains a standard work to which we shall repeatedly return.

Access to the primary sources for the study of *seiðr* was considerably expanded in 1965 when Bo Almqvist published the first of two volumes on the ‘verse magic’ of insult poems (the second followed in 1974). An important aspect of these defamations concerned allegations of sexual perversity and dishonour which were characteristic of the male performance of sorcery. Aspects of Almqvist’s work were taken up by others in the 1970s and 80s as we shall see, but his study remains of fundamental value.

Another scholar of major importance for the study of *seiðr* also emerged in the 1960s, when Peter Buchholz devoted his doctoral research to shamanism in the Old Icelandic sources (1968, two chapters of which appeared in English in 1971). This will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, but in the context of *seiðr*’s research history it is important to note how Buchholz was the first to explicitly set out what we might call the ‘shamanic parameters’ for Old Norse sorcery. Following a source-critical line with the Old Norse texts, Buchholz was the first scholar to emphasise that any shamanic discussion of *seiðr* must first be rooted in a discussion of shamanism itself, and that the definition of this concept is variable. He also focused on the cultural location of the Vikings in the circumpolar region. Searching for elements in the *seiðr* complex which he felt could be securely linked to a shamanic world-view, • ○Buchholz proposed the following (1968: 22–77): religious phenomena the animal ‘auxiliary spirits’

- ○ an ideology of transformation the specific form of the Norse soul beliefs
- • the tiered worlds and the World Tree ecstatic techniques and social
- ○ context stimulation through fire and heat spirit vision and altered states
- ○ of consciousness special gender constructions for those who performed
- ○ such rituals the place occupied by the performers of *seiðr* in Norse society In the same year that Buchholz’s thesis appeared, Jere Fleck published his own doctoral work on the motif of acquiring mystical knowledge in Old Norse religion. *Seiðr* made a very brief appearance again in 1970, in Anne Holtsmark’s synthesis on Viking-Age beliefs, *Norrøn mytologi* (a Swedish translation appeared in 1992), which repeats the shamanic view of sorcery.

Also in 1970, Dumézil's *Du mythe au roman* appeared, which took up his shamanic critique of seiðr once again. He is respectful to Strömbäck, though finds his interpretations over-extended, and stresses how all the sources which can be related to a shamanic view of *seiðr* are very late (*ibid*: 69–74). Dumézil also tries very sensibly to move the debate away from 'black' and 'white' forms of magic to a consideration of higher and lower categories, seen especially in relation to the formalised cults of the gods.

In 1971 perhaps partly in response to Buchholz and Holtmark, Fleck prepared two papers in which he tried to refute shamanic interpretations of Óðinn's behaviour in *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*; these are taken up in the next chapter. A year later in 1972, Thomas Markey made some interesting observations on the etymology of *ergi*, the special state of shamefulness associated with men who performed *seiðr*, examined in detail in the following chapter. In 1973 Margaret Clunies Ross published a paper which took up other aspects of this complex, in an analysis of an episode from the *Ragnarsdrápa*. Here Clunies Ross explored several instances of 'anal insult' and allegations of sorcerous homosexuality in the Old Norse corpus. Another important article on the same subject was put forward by Folke Ström in the same year, with an English version in 1974. All of this work was an important fore-runner to the more developed studies of *ergi* that would come later from Preben Meulengracht Sørensen.

In 1973 a veteran of the *seiðr* debate took the stage again, albeit briefly, when the seventy-two-year-old Otto Höfler produced a large thesis on transformation cults, effectively the abandoned follow-up volume to his 1934 book. In the sixties he had produced a few small works on Goethe, but was perhaps encouraged to return to his earlier field by the cultural spirit of the times. In his 1973(a) book, it is striking how much space is devoted to the various forms of hallucinogenic and narcotic stimuli that he believed lay behind the trance experiences of the Iron Age. He writes at length of 'the cult of masks' inherent in the rituals of Óðinn, and argues that sorcery played a major role in this, linked to his old ideas about totemic warrior fraternities.

Höfler's book, *Verwandlungskulte, Volkssagen und Mythen*, is a difficult work that at times strays far beyond the Northern world in its proposals for universal mythical themes. It also contains slight hints of its author's former ideological allegiances in the emphasis on martial frenzy, and I wonder

(though cannot prove) if these may have been inspired by the work of Konrad Lorenz. The latter's thought-provoking and somewhat notorious book on the behavioural reflexes of human aggression – *Das sogenannte Böse*, 'The So-Called Evil' – was published in 1963 and it is virtually impossible that Höfler had not read it given his interests in the anthropology of war. Its absence from Höfler's bibliography can be explained by the fact that Lorenz had been (somewhat unfairly) accused of Nazi sympathies, with an obvious association to his own life that Höfler would wish to avoid. We shall return to Lorenz in chapter 6 and discover that his work in fact included explicit rejections of fascism and racism in all their forms. By contrast, Höfler's published record contained the very opposite of such exonerations, and having managed to salvage some of his reputation he may not have dared quote a work that I am certain was a major inspiration. With all this in mind, it is nonetheless clear that Höfler's book on shape-changing still has much to offer the student of Norse sorcery. Again, he effortlessly returns to the necessity of seeing ritual in a *total* social context.

Höfler was not the only giant of *seiðr* studies to resurface at this time. In the seventies and later, a number of smaller works by Dag Strömbäck also appeared, some published posthumously after his death in 1978. In these papers he returned to the subject of the soul in Norse tradition, including naturally some discussions of *seiðr*, but in a form that essentially summarises aspects of his doctoral thesis updated with literature published in the intervening period (*e.g.* 1975, 1989).

In 1975 a short monograph on *seiðr* was produced as an undergraduate dissertation by Anders Nordin at the University of Stockholm, in which he critically reviewed the shamanic interpretations put forward by Ohlmarks.

One aspect of Óðinn's personality that had hitherto received comparatively little attention was the great number of internal contradictions in the god's powers. Chief amongst these is his role as the male war-god and simultaneously as master of the 'female' sorcery of *seiðr*, which was supposedly shameful for men to perform. In 1976 Richard Auld tried to resolve this problem by subjecting Óðinn to literary psychoanalysis, and concluded that the god was a kind of "mediating synthesis between two psychic poles", especially between the Æsir and Vanir (*ibid*: 149). This is an interesting idea, of Óðinn as the true unifier of the Norse world-system, but

unfortunately many of Auld's arguments are mired in rather strained Freudian semiotics – for example, he follows Neumann in seeing Óðinn's cloak as "a feminine symbol of shelter and protection", apparently forgetting that such garments were a standard part of male dress throughout the North (*ibid*: 150).

A new, structuralist approach to the Norse sorceresses was adopted by Lotte Motz in 1980, the same year as Aage Kabell published a masterly if over-worked re-interpretation of the whole skaldic institution, which he argued was closely linked to that of the shaman. His notes on the use of drums in Norse religion are especially interesting, claiming that they were used to provide a beat to which the skalds recited. Also in 1980, Jens Peter Schjødt produced the first of several sceptical articles on claims for shamanic initiations in the Eddic corpus; this work is discussed in the next chapter.

At the same time Preben Meulengracht Sørensen produced what still remains the fundamental study of *ergi*, the powerful and highly negative sexual associations with which *seiðr* was charged. This book, *Norrønt nid* (1980), was published in English in 1983 and we shall return to it in chapter 3.

In 1981, a French synthesis of Old Norse religion also included a focus on *seiðr* in a shamanic context, and also emphasised its links to the belief system of the Sámi (Boyer 1981: 148–57). Here, Óðinn is again described formally as a 'god-shaman'. During the same period another French scholar, François-Xavier Dillmann, was working on a full thesis on the subject, completed in 1986 as *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*. In the same year as Dillmann's thesis was submitted, Boyer also wrote his own book on Old Norse magic, *Le monde du double* (1986). At the time of writing the first edition of *The Viking Way*, Dillmann's PhD remained unpublished and I was unfortunately unable to consult it, relying instead on summaries of its contents in some of the author's later articles (1993; 1994). However, as noted above, in 2006 Dillmann's book finally appeared in print, and forms a lasting textual resource for anyone interested in Old Norse sorcery.

The possibility that the Eddic poems may have been ritual incantations in themselves was also raised around this time, by Einar Haugen (1983). He suggested that the various cycles of mythical knowledge should be seen as different facets of Óðinn's personality, interpreted as a series of 'masks' – both literal and figurative – that are slowly peeled away as an initiate approaches the true nature of the god. Despite the close fit with shamanic ideas, Haugen

also rejects this particular view of Óðinn (*ibid*: 20). In the same year a brief comparison of Finnish shamanistic traditions with Nordic *seiðr* was published by Kuusi & Honko (1983: 24–32), though this mostly presented the *Eiríks saga rauða* episode for a new audience.

Also at this time the Norwegian historian of religions Ronald Grambo published two papers on specific aspects of *seiðr*, including one on Þorbiorg in *Eiríks saga rauða* (1984) and a second on sexuality in relation to the rituals (1989). The latter paper especially focused on North American gender constructions, such as the so-called 'berdaches' of the Plains. These will be examined in chapters 3 and 5.

Between these two publications, Gro Steinsland produced two important papers on the sorceresses (1985a & b), and similar themes were taken up by Grete Schmidt Poulsen in a paper from 1986, building on her unpublished doctorate from 1982. All these are again taken up below.

In 1986 W. I. Miller published a paper on dream figures in relation to sorcery, seen from the perspective of the period of the sagas' composition rather than the Viking Age that they describe. Another important work for the shamanic interpretation of *seiðr* appeared in 1989, with Stephen Glosecki's examination of similar themes in the Old English poetic corpus. He adopted many of Buchholz's recommendations for a circumpolar frame of reference, and brought in both the Norse and Sámi as points of comparison for his Anglo-Saxon material. Significantly, as an American researcher Glosecki made extensive use of First Nations mythology, and it is in his work that the ritual complexes of the Viking Age were first compared in depth to the Northwest Coast cultures. We shall rediscover this material in chapter 5. Miller's ideas surfaced again in a different context in 1991, with Gísli Pálsson's study of witchcraft accusations in the sagas, which he argued reflected the 'micro-politics' of the early Icelandic commonwealth.

In 1991, Grambo returned to *seiðr* studies and published a short but influential paper in a conference volume on Nordic paganism. Subtitling his article 'a clarificatory programme', he set out to define the key problems linked to a study of *seiðr*, and to propose steps for their solution. Like Buchholz before him (1971: 7), Grambo understood that despite the monumental works by Strömbäck and others, there remained much that needed to be elucidated about Nordic sorcery. With this in mind, he laid out an eight-

1.point plan for future research (Grambo 1991: 138): the necessity for isolating 2.*seiðr*'s constituent parts in order to create a typology the necessity for understanding how *seiðr* functioned within the religious system of which it 3.was a part the analysis of *seiðr* as a social phenomenon, rooted in 4.contemporary norms the analysis of relationships between *seiðr* and Sámi 5.shamanism the necessity of studying *seiðr* in the context of the Eurasian 6.thought-world, beyond the Nordic sphere the analysis of the Norse myths to 7.trace elements of *seiðr*, and to provide the foundation for a typology to study whether or not *seiðr* changed over time, in terms of its morphology, structure 8.and function, and especially around the time of the conversion to Christianity the analysis of rock carvings in order to trace possible shamanic imagery Having drawn up a programme for continued work, Grambo apparently abandoned the study of *seiðr* for other subjects, and as far as I am aware has never published on it again.

The 1990s began well for *seiðr* studies with Meulengracht Sørensen & Steinsland's synthesis on religion (1990), which for the first time presented *seiðr* as an important and integral part of the Norse belief systems as a totality. Both authors drew on their work during the previous decade to good effect, with Sørensen's studies of *ergi* and gender combining with Steinsland's on the *volur*. The book is limited academically by being (intentionally) presented in a very popular style, but wins by its communication of these approaches to the widest audience. A more scholarly, though still public-oriented, overview presenting much the same conclusions was produced by them a few years later (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994).

An unusual contribution to *seiðr* studies was also made in 1990 by the Italian *Annaliste* historian Carlo Ginzburg, in his controversial survey of ecstatic cults. Ginzburg examines the complete corpus of evidence relating to European witchcraft, especially the archives of the Inquisition, and concludes that these practices were not only real but in fact a genuine reflection of shamanic traditions spanning the whole Continent and with roots stretching far back into antiquity. He takes up a great many familiar themes – including shape-changing, soul journeying and sexual sorcery – and includes *seiðr* in his review of European magical traditions. Most importantly, and extending from his 1966 work on a kind of shamanic soldiery in the Friuli region of Italy, Ginzburg devotes a substantial portion of the book to the notions of combat in

ecstasy and animal disguise (1990: 153–204). At times his comparative survey is somewhat strained, covering the whole of Europe and much of Asia over thousands of years, but this is an interesting and thought-provoking work. Its contribution to *seiðr* research has been undervalued, and some of Ginzburg's conclusions will be taken up below in chapter 6.

The early part of the 1990s was otherwise dominated by the application of gender perspectives to the interpretation of Norse magic, often with considerable success. In 1991 Katherine Morris published an interesting survey of the sorceresses as icons of medieval understandings of sexuality, to which we shall return in chapter 3. In the same year Jenny Jochens produced a useful exploration of gender roles in Nordic sorcery. She expanded upon this in 1993, just as Lotte Motz presented her own archetypes of femininity in Nordic myth. Jochens finally presented her research in full with the publication of *Old Norse images of women* (1996). These works contain a number of interesting insights into the gender mechanisms of *seiðr*, at times controversially so, and Jochens is the scholar who has taken the sexual elements of the rituals furthest. Her argument that the practice of *seiðr* incorporated literal sexual performance is discussed in chapter 3. The *volur* are also discussed by Helga Kress (1993), who interprets many of the sorcery narratives as signals in an ongoing conflict of gender. She argues that this is played out within the framework of Christian misogyny and directed against a predominantly female pre-Christian power base. This work forms the introduction to the first volume of the *Nordisk Kvinnolitteraturhistoria* ('History of Nordic Women's Literature'), which is a uniquely prominent position for research on the Norse sorceresses.

In the 1990s the philologist Clive Tolley also produced a number of original studies of *seiðr*, especially in comparison with Finno-Ugric practices (1993: ch. 5; 1994; 1995a). Tolley works almost exclusively with the shamanic parameters of *seiðr*, and has not so much addressed its functions in a social context, but his research is among the very best on the subject; my debt to his work on spirit assistants will become obvious below. Since the publication of the first edition, among other works Tolley has produced a truly monumental assessment of the sources for Norse shamanism (2009a), which is discussed in chapter 8. Tolley's collaboration with Ursula Dronke on volume II of *The Poetic Edda* is also important, as this has meant that analyses of *seiðr* and its

significance have for the first time been incorporated into a critical edition of this fundamental source.

Jens Peter Schjødt returned to his earlier theme of shamanic initiation ceremonies in 1993, with a paper on Óðinn's self-sacrifice, discussed in chapter 3. The following year an interesting volume on Viking-Age totemic cults appeared in Polish, by the historian of religions Leszek Paweł Słupecki. The title translates to '*Warriors and werewolves*', but unfortunately the work has no summary in another European language and so I have been unable to consult it. It appears to deal at great length with the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, in much the same vein as Höfler's book from 1934, and should thus be of great interest to scholars of Norse sorcery.

During this period a major study in folkloristics was being produced by the British-Icelandic scholar Terry Gunnell, whose thesis was published in 1995 as *The origins of drama in Scandinavia*. Like Haugen in the early 1980s, Gunnell focuses on the idea of Old Norse literature and poetry as reflecting actual performances, using later evidence of masking traditions and festive dramas to explore the ritual calendar of the early Scandinavians. In addition to the textual corpus, he employs with dexterity a large number of archaeological sources – very unusually for a scholar whose primary field is not material culture studies. Gunnell discusses *seiðr* at length, and his excellent work is treated in several chapters below; since the first edition appeared, this has been complemented by several other developments of the same theme, (*e.g.* Gunnell 2006, 2008a, and by his edited collection from 2007).

The Anglo-Saxon analogues for *seiðr* have been treated by Richard North in his 1997 study of paganism in the Old English sources. He makes many valuable observations on sorcery in the context of sexuality and regeneration, to which we shall return.

In the same year the great Icelandic philologist Hermann Pálsson published an important book on the *landnám*, suggesting that a considerable proportion of the 'Norwegian' settlers were in fact of Sámi origin. This well-argued thesis has been widely discussed, but in the present context we can note that Hermann includes some five chapters on different aspects of sorcery and the soul, including one each on *seiðr* and *útiseta*. He focuses on sorcery used for sexual purposes and in connection with aggression of various kinds, and supports a shamanic interpretation with its origins among the Sámi.

Also in 1997 an Uppsala scholar, Stefan Andersson, produced an undergraduate dissertation on *seiðr* as expressed in four Eddic poems – *Voluspá*, *Þrymskvíða*, *Hávamál* and *Baldrs draumar* – against a background study of circumpolar shamanism. Rejecting Strömbäck's ideas about a Sámi origin for *seiðr*, and also Ohlmark's 'subartic' theories, Andersson instead refers to Nordic sorcery as having developed along its own path from a common Eurasian root of what he calls *urshamanism*, 'original shamanism'. Two years later Andersson expanded on these ideas with a short paper on *seiðr* in the *Historia Norvegiae* and Saxo.

In 1998 Słupecki published a second book on Norse religion, this time focusing on divination and prophecy, and with an English summary in addition to the Polish text. A chapter is devoted to *seiðr*, in which Słupecki follows Ohlmarks in arguing that this kind of sorcery cannot be truly considered shamanic as it did not involve deep ecstasy.

The following year, 1999, the American folklorist Thomas DuBois released an important work on *Nordic religions in the Viking Age*. In some ways this was the single most innovative publication on Scandinavian pre-Christian belief for several decades, and the key to this lies in the fact that DuBois is the first scholar to have attempted a systematic integration of Nordic and Sámi religion on equal terms. He is primarily a specialist in Finno-Ugric and Sámi languages and religions, and the book benefits enormously from his ability to access material often denied to Western scholars by the linguistic barrier. The volume is built up along similarly unconventional lines, abandoning the familiar concentration on the gods to look instead at the concept of the restless dead, the importance of spirits, and, especially, *seiðr*. The latter is given an entire chapter, one eighth of the book.

In connection with the reissue of Strömbäck's thesis in 2000, several other authors contributed essays on *seiðr* scholarship since the book's original publication. A contribution by Bo Almqvist is of particular importance here, as he expands upon Strömbäck's catalogue of literary references to *seiðr* with several new excerpts. In the same volume Hans Mebius discusses some developments in Sámi research, which will be taken up in chapter 4.

Though not named as such, *seiðr* has also been briefly discussed in a recent general synthesis on shamanism by the folklorist and historian Ronald Hutton (2001: 139f). The bulk of the book is made up of an excellent study of Siberian

religion, but unfortunately Hutton has been woefully misinformed about the Scandinavian source material. The practices of the Norse and Sámi are treated as a seamless continuum, for example, and he seems to be claiming that *Eiríks saga rauða* contains the sole reference to a *volva* in the entire Old Norse corpus! Hutton is a world-leading specialist on English pagan ritual, but one feels that on this occasion his usually exemplary scholarship has been spread a little thin.

In the same year an interesting thesis appeared from Oslo, in which the usual range of medieval written sources are employed by Dror Segev to analyse not Viking-Age sorcery but that of the Middle Ages proper. Segev takes this discussion in a number of exciting new directions, not least through a study of possible Jewish influences on the descriptions of medieval magic; we will revisit this work in chapter 8.

Prior to the publication of the first edition of this book, the two most recent specific studies of *seiðr* both appeared in 2001. The first of these was Jens Peter Schjødt's consolidation of several years of work in a paper considering Óðinn as a shaman. In several conference presentations Schjødt has argued that the shamanic overtones of the *seiðr* ritual are no more than general tendencies, and here he completes his argument by suggesting that Óðinn should be considered as primarily a god of the elite, to whom a certain degree of supernatural power is inherent. He rightly draws attention to the source-critical problems in extending the saga accounts of *seiðr* with any security back into the Viking Age, and also finds contradictions in the notion of Óðinn's supposedly shamanic powers and his other functions – for example, as a psychopomp, a god of kings and chieftains, and as a supernatural ruler-figure. These ideas are discussed in chapter 5.

The second publication on *seiðr* from 2001 was Catharina Raudvere's contribution to the medieval volume in the series *Witchcraft and magic in Europe*. Focusing generally on *trolldómr*, Raudvere's text is essentially a small book, and provides the fullest recent survey of *seiðr* and its analogues, perhaps even the most comprehensive since Strömbäck. Raudvere provides an excellent overview of the sources and in her introductory remarks gives one of the most nuanced analyses of their convoluted critical value that has yet appeared (*ibid*: 75–90). Most importantly for current research, she discusses Norse sorcery as something that had once been perceived as a reality, and thus

brings a fresh approach to the exploration of familiar material. Her text is deliberately short on examples, and instead attempts to draw a bigger picture of changing attitudes to magic over the whole span of the early medieval period. In part the work is hampered by the externally imposed framework of 'witchcraft' inherent in the series, which has brought a somewhat anachronistic emphasis on accounts of sorcery seen through accusations and legal proceedings, but this does not detract from the overall achievement of the essay. This is one of the most important studies of *seiðr* to have appeared to date, and several of Raudvere's ideas are discussed in the following chapters. Raudvere's second major work on Old Norse sorcery (2003) is discussed in chapter 8 below, and referenced throughout.

A broadly similar line to that of Jens Peter Schjødt is taken in a new introduction to Norse mythology for gymnasial students and undergraduates (Näsström 2002a, see especially pp. 104ff, 237–42). *Seiðr* is briefly discussed, but the intentional simplifications of the text occasionally result in a somewhat superficial analysis. One interesting feature is the author's total rejection of shamanic interpretations in *any* cultural context, on the grounds that the very concept of shamanism "is now a misused term … which embraces so wide an area as to essentially have no meaning" (*ibid*: 61). This will be critically discussed below.

We have now reviewed the background to Nordic sorcery, in the context of the mythologies of the Scandinavians, the range of supernatural beings that populate them, and the ways in which these have been approached by scholars. To this we have added the material world of Norse cult – the places in which the gods were approached, the people who did so, and the larger landscape (both social and physical) in which these were set. The relationship of magic to these complex of forces has been questioned, and we have begun to explore the terminology of sorcery. Having surveyed the sources for *seiðr* and the history of its study, we are now equipped to examine it in greater detail.

3

Seiðr

…den kanske mest svårtillgängliga magiska företeelsen i västnordisk tid, nämligen sejden (…perhaps the most inaccessible magical phenomenon in West Nordic history, namely seiðr*)* Emanuel Linderholm, professor of history of religions, recommending a promising subject for postgraduate research to the young Dag Strömbäck, Uppsala 1921 (quoted by Strömbäck's daughter Gertrud Gidlund, 2000: 325)

Óðinn

There is a sense in which any discussion of *seiðr*, and its social context in the world of the pre-Christian Norse, must begin with Óðinn.

His origins are uncertain and obscure. We know from abundant source material that he was simultaneously a god of war and poetry, a seducer and a trickster, the embodiment of the mind and the supreme master of sorcery. He could control the weather and the elements, he could heal the sick and he could kill his enemies. According to Snorri, he will live forever. Óðinn was a god of the elite and of warriors, but was at the same time a supernatural protector of the outcast and the loner. In several of his personas he appears as a cloaked, friendless wanderer. As a patron, he understood the bitter pleasure of vengeance fulfilled and violence unleashed, but also the hungers of lust and love, the arrogance of skaldic composition, and the bleakness of senility. He was a god for both the young and the old. In particular he grasped the paradoxical balance between the wisdom that increased with age and the infirmity that often prevented it from being put into practice. In his quest for ultimate power expressed through total information, Óðinn was left with few illusions as to the price of his knowledge. From what we know of those who followed him, a call on his skills required a kind of surrender, not only to a

reality stripped of comforting filters but also to a liberation of the faculties. Such release could be attained along many paths – in the ecstatic rush of battle, through intoxication and the trance rituals that we shall shortly explore, and by the pursuit of dangerous trains of thought.

Óðinn was a being of many faces and facets. He had over two hundred names, as we shall see, and in one poem introduces himself with the words *héto mek Grímr*, 'I am called Mask' (*Grímnismál* 46). Above all he was someone in whom it was hazardous to place one's trust. He has probably attracted more scholarly attention that any other Norse divinity.

One of the earliest academic studies was that by Eiríkur Magnússon, who in 1895 published his paper on Yggdrasill in both English and Icelandic editions. However, the first major work on Óðinn was the book produced by H. M. Chadwick in 1899, which remained one of the standard texts on the god until long into the twentieth century. Surprisingly, it is still one of only a handful of monographs devoted to Óðinn, though of course the works that take up aspects of his persona run well into treble figures.

The Old Norse sources in which Óðinn appears are listed by Halvorsen (1967a), and most comprehensively by Lassen (2005, 2006, 2011) on whose superb work future textual scholarship on this topic will surely rest. The main publications on Óðinn are summarised by Turville-Petre (1964: 323) and Simek (1993: 245), with more recent overviews by Kershaw (2000) and Kaliff & Sundqvist (2004).

The mythological tales and attributes of Óðinn are well-known, but a human view of this god is harder to find. In order to understand how he was perceived by his followers, in 'real' terms that affected their lives, the closest insight into this has probably been handed down to us by Egill Skalla-Grímsson, one of the greatest of the Icelandic warrior-poets. His relationship with Óðinn runs as a constant throughout his adulthood, but it is only through a late tragedy that this is clarified. According to his saga, that many scholars believe to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson, towards the end of his life Egill loses one of the last of his surviving sons. An earlier boy was carried away by a fever, and now his beloved Boðvarr has been drowned in the most banal of boating accidents. Old and embittered, Egill despairs. At first he tries to starve himself to death, but his daughter persuades him to instead make a

fitting memorial poem for his son. It is then that he composes the *Sonatorrek*, 'the Wreck of Sons', thought to date to around 960.

All his life Egill has followed Óðinn, his patron of war and the mead of poetry, and has enjoyed success sufficient to make him a household name in Iceland even today, a thousand years later. And yet after all this, over 25 strophes in the *Sonatorrek* Egill curses the god whom he feels has taken all meaning from his life:

Áttak gótt við geirs dróttin, gerðumk tryggr at trúa hónum, áðr vinan vagna rúni sigrhofundr of sleit við mik.
I had good things from the Lord of the Spear [Óðinn], I became ready to trust in him, before the victory-lord, the friend of chariots [Óðinn] broke friendship with me.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson, *Sonatorrek* 22; translation after Fell 1975: 198

It is then, in the heart of his grief, that Egill realises what Óðinn has done: through the treacherous theft of his son and the consequent pain, the god has opened up in him the deepest reserves of poetry that would have been otherwise unreachable. One scholar, Bo Ralph (1976), has even hinted that the divinely bestowed inspiration for this poem may have been conveyed through *seiðr*, a comparison taken up again by Meylan (2013: 50) for Egill's other works, albeit in terms of literary motif.

The *Sonatorrek* ends with words of reconciliation and acceptance of fate:

Blœtka því bróður Vílis, goðjaðar, at gjarn séak; þo hefr Míms vinr mér of fengnar holva bœtr, es et betra telk.
Gofumk íþrótt ulfs of bági vígi vanr vammi firða ok þat geð, es gerðak mér vísa fjandr af vélondum.
Nú erum torvelt, Tveggja bága njorva nipt á nesi stendr, skalk þó glaðr góðum vilja ok ó-hryggr heljar bíða.

I make no sacrifice to the brother of Vílir [Óðinn], the foremost of gods, out of eagerness. Yet Mímr's friend [Óðinn] has provided for me recompense for injuries if I make a better count.

The wolf's adversary [Óðinn], used to fights, gave to me a flawless art [poetry] and that temper which made known enemies out of tricksters. Now things are

hard for me, the sister of the Double's adversary [Óðinn > Fenrir > Hel] stands on the headland, yet I shall gladly, with good courage and unconcerned, wait for my death.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson, *Sonatorrek* 23–5; translation after Fell 1975: 198

Egill abandons thoughts of suicide, and gains fatalistic determination – and perhaps a little pride – from the success of his verses. On a small, human scale, this is the same philosophy that we see in the gods' preparations for the end of the world. The *Sonatorrek* is Egill's greatest poem and one of his patron's final services to him, along with the *Arinbjarnarkviða* that he will compose two years later in honour of his best friend. At the extremity of a man's capacity for art, and bought with an agony that brings him to the edge of death, we see the terrible beauty of Óðinn's gifts. As in so many other things, this again reveals the subtlety and sophistication of the Viking mind.

Óðinn the sorcerer

The extent of Snorri's knowledge of Norse pre-Christian belief, and the light in which he presents it, have long been subjects for study (cf. Raudvere 2003: 102–11). Some scholars have taken a highly sceptical view of his descriptions of magic, such as Margaret Clunies Ross (1994: 209) who argues that "*Ynglingasaga* is a rationalisation of established social and religious custom and cannot be taken as a straightforward historical explanation of why *seiðr* was women's business". The problem with this kind of analysis is that it starts from an assumption (and it is nothing more) that there cannot really be any kind of Viking-Age reality behind the later texts. Thus elsewhere in her work (*ibid*: 206–11), Clunies Ross goes on to discuss the Æsir's rejection of *seiðr* and its relegation to women in terms of overall medieval gender strategies, Freudian symbolism and the agenda of modern literary critique – all of which ignores the fact that the sexual codes of *seiðr* as described in the sources are perfectly intelligible in the context of shamanic anthropology, as we shall see.

There is no doubt that Snorri's views cannot be taken at face value, but they can be deconstructed with care. As we have seen, Snorri focuses his description of *seiðr* on Óðinn as its master, with its human practitioners in a secondary role. In analysing what may have lain behind this viewpoint, we

shall look first at Óðinn, then at Freyja, and finally at the male and female sorcerers of the Viking Age.

If we examine the description of Óðinn's magical skills presented above in *Ynglingasaga* 7, we can first note that *seiðr* is only one category among several. It is in fact possible to discern a certain pattern based on type of ability and the form of sorcery (*fjolkyngi* is Snorri's collective term) with which it was • ○ ○associated: *galdrar* (*ljóð*) and runic sorcery shape-shifting ethereal travel ○in animal form while physical body remains still control of fires, water and ○ ○wind conversation with men in their graves, or with the hanged various ○forms of 'helping spirits' (Mímr's head, Huginn and Muninn) transport with • •a magical ship (Skíðblaðnir) used for his own purposes or those of others ○ ○ ○ ○*seiðr* divining the future killing inducing sickness inflicting misfortune ○ ○depriving people of their wits, or augmenting them depriving people of •their strength, or augmenting it used for his own purposes?

- brings with it immense *ergi* shameful for 'manly men' to practice
- taught to women other skills (*fjolkyngi, fróðleikr, ljóð*) revealing the
- hidden opening mountains, stones, underground places and burial
- mounds binding the inhabitants of these places Some of Óðinn's attributes as depicted here are problematic in themselves, and contradict other sources for Norse mythology (sometimes even those by Snorri himself): for example, the ship Skíðblaðnir belongs to Freyr in *Grímnismál* 43, and also in *Gylfaginning* 42 and *Skáldskaparmál* 7. Others are complemented or expanded by additional texts, such as the explanation of Mímr's head.

However, the realm of sorcery is actually present in almost all aspects of the god. We can begin with Óðinn as the supreme poet. His acquisition of the mead of poetry from the dwarfs and giants is a well-known story that exists in several versions (*e.g. Skjáldskaparmál* 4–6; *Hávamál* 104–10, 140). More than one of these seems to have been current in the Viking Age, as we find allusions to them in skaldic verse such as Egill's *Hofuðlausn* (2) and in a number of kennings (Turville-Petre 1964: 38ff). In *Ynglingasaga* 6, Óðinn is even said to speak only in skaldic verse.

His gift of poetic skill to those who follow him has several dimensions, not the least of which is a kind of holiness brought about by the intoxication of words. There is a clear sense in which poetry is a means of communication

between humans and gods, and indeed is seen as conveying a measure of supernatural power (by definition, in fact, as the original abilities of this kind were retrieved by Óðinn from another world).

Similar features can be seen in the famous story recorded in *Hávamál* (138–45), which relates how Óðinn hangs for nine nights on a tree with roots that no-one knows, battered by the wind. He is *geiri undaðr/ok gefinn óðni, /sjálfr sjálfum mér*, 'wounded with a spear/and given to Óðinn, / myself to myself' (the main research on this is summarised by Simek 1993: 248f). One of the first to discuss this aspect of the god was Sophus Bugge (1889: 291ff). As we have seen above, his work had been in part stimulated by Fritzner's studies of sorcery, but he rejected a pagan origin for the image of Óðinn on the tree, and instead claimed it as a later interpolation of Christ on the cross. Turville-Petre (1964: 42ff) and others since him have refuted this, and demonstrated convincingly that every element of the tale is actually appropriate in a pagan context: the World Tree, the significance of the number nine, sacrificial hanging, the use of a dedicatory spear. This is especially true for the ecstatic haze through which Óðinn first perceives the runes (see below for more on this word):

nýsta ek niðr,	downward I peered,
nam ek upp rúnar,	I took up the runes,
œpandi nam,	screaming I took them,
fell ek aptr þaðan.	then I fell back from there.

Hávamál 139; translation after Larrington 1996: 34

Again there is a theme of the acquisition of supernatural power, as Óðinn learns 'nine mighty songs' and drinks the mead of poetry (strophe 140). Raudvere (2001: 115) has drawn attention to a certain focus on direction here, in that knowledge is called up from below. Finally Óðinn's mind itself begins to expand, his thoughts tumbling over one another in displays of mental dexterity, here laid out with marvellous suggestion by the *Hávamál* poet:

Þá nam ek frævask	Then I began to quicken
ok fróðr vera	and to be wise
ok vaxa ok vel hafask;	and grow and prosper;
orð mér af orði	from a word

orðs leitaði,	one word led to another for me,
verk mér af verki	from a deed
verks leitaði.	one deed led to another for me.

Hávamál 141; my translation Extraordinarily, Bugge (1889: 308f) noted that a local dialect variant of these verses was in popular currency as late as the 1870s on the island of Uist in the Shetlands – ‘nine days he hang pa de rütless tree’ – indicating how deeply this pre-Christian visionary experience had been embedded in the minds of the Scandinavians and their descendants, even in the colonies. Jere Fleck (1971a) brought a new spin to the discussion by arguing that Óðinn was hanging upside down on the tree, a position that he justifies by some rather strained interpretations of Germanic sources and increasingly distant cross-cultural comparisons for the ‘ritual inversion’. To my mind this finds little support in any source, especially the mortal parallel in the sacrifice of King Víkarr by hanging and a spear-thrust described in the longer version of *Gautreks saga* (7).

One obvious aspect of Óðinn’s self-sacrifice is surprisingly seldom remarked upon: he does not die (*contra* Turville-Petre 1964: 49f). In this may be the key to his special relationship with the dead, and especially those who have died by hanging. Several of the god’s names relate to this, as we shall see below, and there are also kennings which mention him in connection with the gallows. From *Ynglingasaga* (7) we have already seen how Óðinn would ‘sit beneath the hanged’, and in a *lausavísa* of Þórbjorn Brúnason from 1014, Óðinn is called their *heimþingaðar*, ‘visitor’. The purpose of these visits is revealed in the so-called *Ljóðatal*, the ‘Catalogue of Chants’ that appears as strophes 146–163 of *Hávamál*. We shall return to these spells several times in the course of this book, but here we can recall the twelfth in the list:

þat kann ek it tólpta:	I know a twelfth:
ef ek sé á tré uppi	if I see up in a tree
váfa virgilná,	a noosed corpse,
svá ek ríst	I can so cut
ok í rúnum fák	and colour the runes
at sá gengr gumi	that the man will walk
ok mælir við mik.	and talk with me.

Hávamál 157; my translation The motif also occurs in the archaeological material, as there are several depictions of hanged men on Viking-Age picture-stones from Gotland (*e.g.* stone I from Lärbro Stora Hammars; Lindqvist 1941: Fig. 81) and on other objects such as the Oseberg tapestry which is considered below. Of particular interest here is the picture-stone from Bote in Garda parish (*ibid*: Fig. 141; Göransson 1999: 66f) which shows a line of seven hanged women, a most unusual image. Perhaps they depict the seven sorceresses whom Óðinn seduces in *Hárbarðzljóð*, though there is no mention of their death.

Turville-Petre (1964: 45) makes the interesting point that we do not know exactly what kind of wisdom Óðinn gained from his gallows conversations. All his other exploits of this kind have specific objectives – discovering the fate of his son and what will happen at the Ragnarok, obtaining the mead of poetry, and so on – but Óðinn's dialogues with the hanged remain mysterious. It is worth emphasising that these are ordinary human dead, not the powerful *volur* whom the god also consults in poems such as *Voluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. Óðinn is not all-knowing in himself, but he is prepared to run terrible risks to seek out knowledge from those who possess it. From his interrogation of the hanged, and the dead sorceresses, it is clear that death gave access to a secret lore than the god himself could only reach at second-hand (cf. Ström 1947). This is important because it suggests a new aspect of Viking-Age belief, namely that human beings could potentially explore places closed to even the most powerful of divinities. The fact that these people would have to be dead first may not have been especially relevant, considering the different aspects of the soul that we have seen in chapter 2. It also is clear that human sorcerers, not just Óðinn, tried to gain knowledge from the dead in this way, as we shall see below when we look at the practice of *útiseta*.

The idea of the hidden and its revelation permeates every aspect of Óðinn's personality, even his persona as a battle god. Here it is manifested as trickery and lies, used to promote strife at every level from family quarrels to urging whole societies towards war. Time and again in the Eddic poems and in Snorri, we see Óðinn manipulating events for the worst. In the *Hárbarðzljóð* 24 he boasts that *atta ek iofrom, en aldri sættak*, 'I incited the princes never to make peace'. In the sagas and in Saxo, Óðinn appears in disguise to bring kings into

conflict, to break the bonds of kinship and generally to defile the social norms that sought to prevent these things.

Turville-Petre (1964: 51f) sees this aspect of the god as actively evil and sinister – Óðinn is far from the Classical traditions of divinities promoting a nobly romantic image of battle as a manly pursuit. Certainly this view was present in the Viking Age too, but in Óðinn we see war in a different light. The stereotypical victory through martial valour is here transformed into the altogether more sordid reality of early medieval combat: fighting men are stabbed from behind, or make a fatal slip, or freeze at a crucial moment; they are killed by mistake or through confusion, and often the bravest and best are the first to fall. All this was the god's doing, and though this can be perceived as a kind of betrayal, it paradoxically also fits in with the Óðinnic theme of revealing unwelcome truths in all their clarity. After all, these were the brutal facts of hand-to-hand fighting, the same as we see in European chronicles and on runestone inscriptions. Battles were won by default when one side 'gained possession of the field', a euphemism for everyone else having died or fled in panic. Runic epitaphs tell of a warrior fighting on 'as long as he could hold weapons', with an implicit image of the bloody circumstances in which that was no longer possible.

The malice of Óðinn gives us another insight into the mind-set of his followers, because there is no doubt that despite these tendencies he was genuinely seen as a appropriate patron of the elite, and especially of kings. Those who were said explicitly to have honoured the god by sending him the slain included rulers such as Hákon and Haraldr hárfagri, as well as heroes like Starkaðr, Sigurðr, Sigmundr and Sinfjotli. Battle itself was a sacrificial act, as the enemy dead were offered to Óðinn in advance. These elements of kingship, sorcery and power come together in the man who probably comes closest to embodying all of Óðinn's qualities – Eiríkr blóðøx. Having fought his way to prominence by murdering most of his family, and finally exiled from Norway for his brutality, Eiríkr forged a new kingship for himself in York. It is significant that his queen, Gunnhildr, was notorious as a sorceress and shape-changer – a guise in which she appears in several sagas that we shall discuss below. As a couple they won a deserved reputation for treacherous evil, which is turned to praise in the great *Eiríksmál* commissioned by Gunnhildr after her husband was killed at Stainmore in 954. The poem relates how the foremost of

the *einherjar* welcome Eiríkr to Valholl, to take his place among the leaders of Óðinn's army.

This story also embodies another of the curiosities surrounding the god, because it is almost always at his hands that his most favoured champions are finally killed. This is not a sign of Óðinn withdrawing his support, but is in fact a compliment because it is the manner in which he gathers the dead warrior to him in Valholl. The best of the mortal heroes are needed to fight beside the Æsir at the Ragnarok, and it is only through allowing them to be slain that Óðinn can bring them there.

Part of Óðinn's appeal undoubtedly lay in the opportunities that he offered for experiences beyond the usual social framework – a kind of divine ecstasy that could be obtained through a fusion of his power with the more mundane effects of alcohol, narcotics and what anthropologists would later term 'altered states of consciousness'. Much of this resembles the attractions of the Greek cult of Dionysus, and seems to have carried the same double-edged dangers of the bacchic frenzy. In the words of E. R. Dodds, "for those who do not close their minds against it such experience can be a deep source of spiritual power … but those who repress the demand in themselves or refuse its satisfaction in others transform it by their act into a power of disintegration and destruction" (1960: 14; we shall return to this in chapter 6). In the case of the Óðinnic mysteries, *both* aspects seem to have been socially harnessed – the former as poetic inspiration and the latter as the berserk fury, both meeting in the grey middle-ground of sorcery.

Much of this is combined in the many attempts that have been made to see Óðinn as a shaman, an interpretation that in many ways took off with Strömbäck, Ohlmarks and Höfler as reviewed in chapter 2. The disparate aspects of this argument were summarised effectively by Buchholz (1968: 60–•77), who divided these facets of Óðinn's nature into five groups: the shaman • •as sorcerer the shaman as poet the shaman as warrior (with reference to the •berserkir and ulfheðnar – see ch. 6) the shaman as craftworker (with •reference to the transformatory power of the smith) the shaman as god As we have seen, the notion of Óðinn as shaman was built primarily on the suggestions of trance, soul-journeying and shape-changing for which we find hints in the mythological poems and fuller explanations in Snorri. Beyond these, there are firstly two descriptions of Óðinn in the Poetic *Edda* which

have been interpreted as shamanic initiation rituals. One of these we have already examined, from *Hávamál* when the god hangs for nine nights without food or drink, and has a vision of the runes which he grasps howling. The second is in the *Grímnismál*, in which a disguised Óðinn is made to sit between two fires for nine days and nights, again without eating. As this experience begins to affect him he recites long lists of magic and mythological knowledge.

This has been commented upon by several authors, many of whom have made comparisons with Finnish religion and Vedic sacrificial rituals in India, leading to the conclusion that this is an example of an initiation with shamanic overtones (*e.g.* Pipping 1928b; Krappe 1934; de Vries 1957: §336ff; Schröder 1958; Sauvé 1970). Several other authors have argued against a shamanic interpretation of *Grímnismál*, notably Jere Fleck, who has suggested that it is an attempt to increase supernatural power through the application of heat (1971b: 57). Like de Vries and Schröder, Fleck draws parallels with Indian practices, but differs from them in rejecting an initiatory context. However, as Schjødt has pointed out (1980: 32), this still supports the idea of some kind of augmentation of spiritual power through ordeal, and thus is not far from the shamanic agenda that Fleck rejects. More recently, the 'initiation' interpretation has also found favour with Elizabeth Jackson, in her study of the relationship between the magical lists in *Hávamál* (1994: 56).

While Jens Peter Schjødt generally accepts the account of Óðinn on the tree as representing an initiation (1980: 36; 1993), perhaps even one with shamanic tendencies, I agree with him that the 'fire ordeal' in *Grímnismál* probably does not (1980: 40f). An important clue comes with Óðinn's recitation of magical lore – he does not need to be initiated because he already possesses these skills, and in this poem he has *become* a source of wisdom of the kind that he usually seeks himself (cf. Auld 1976: 156f). The question of heat and its purpose in the *Grímnismál* can be reoriented in the light of other aspects of 'Óðinnic sorcery'. I feel that it can be more reasonably interpreted as a battle ritual connected with the resistance of heat as a useful accomplishment of a warrior, combined with the acquisition of supernatural power for use in that context. We will come back to this in chapter 6, but here we can note that this same motif is in fact found in association with Óðinnic warriors, as in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (31) when Hrólfr and his men are challenged

by Aðils to sit still in his hall while a massive blaze is banked up in front of them. Unlike the god, at last Hrólfr's men can stand the heat no longer; they throw their shields into the flames (discarding shields is a berserker attribute), and leap over the fires to attack their enemy. This is an interesting development in that the flames are in many ways a prelude to the violence, and almost its cause. We should remember that Óðinn's fire ordeal in the *Grímnismál* results in him killing the king. Schjødt discusses all these features at greater length in his later work on initiation rituals in Old Norse spiritual practice (2008: ch. 6).

Shamanic overtones have also been seen in Óðinn's animals, along with other possible helping spirits. Foremost of these are the two ravens alluded to in *Ynglingasaga*, which are nameless there but detailed at length in other sources. One of them, Muninn, is mentioned only in *Grímnismál* 20, but the other, Huginn, appears in a number of sources (as well as the *Grímnismál*, in Eddic poetry the raven plays a part in *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I* 54*; Reginsmál* 18, 26; *Fáfnismál* 35; and *Guðrúnarkviða II* 29). Both birds also appear in skaldic poetry in the form of raven kennings (see Meissner 1921: 120; Turville-Petre 1964: 58).

In *Gylfaginning* 38, Snorri relates how Óðinn sends out the ravens each dawn, and they return at dinner-time to sit on his shoulders and speak the news into his ears. Their intimate link to the god is made clear by *Grímnismál* 20:

Huginn ok Muninn	Huginn and Muninn
fliúga hverian dag	fly every day
iormungrund yfir;	over the mighty earth;
óomk ek of Huginn,	I fear for Huginn,
at hann aptr ne komit,	lest he not come back,
þó siámk meirr um Muninn.	yet I worry more about Muninn.

Grímnismál 20; my translation The ravens' names are difficult to translate exactly, as they have essentially the same meaning in English, but they can be rendered approximately as 'Memory' (Muninn) and 'Mind' (Huginn), though both names have the same connotation of 'Thought'. Clearly, Óðinn is sending out part of his mental faculties in the form of the birds (*Ynglingasaga* mentions that he *endows* them with speech), and he worries that they will be lost. This fear for the hazards of such experiences will be returned to in chapter 6.

Similar associations may have attached to Óðinn's wolves, Freki and Geri, mentioned in the *Grímnismál* (19) and in *Gylfaginning* (38). Their names both mean 'the greedy one', and there is a suggestion that their master keeps them fed on corpses from the battlefield. They do not appear to have specific functions, unlike the ravens, but like them they clearly belong in the category of 'beasts of battle'. Wolves play a major role in the mythology – the clearest example being Fenrir – and as we shall see they are also mentioned as the steeds of troll-women, giantesses and occasionally human sorceresses. The combination of the battlefield and the supernatural appears again, and it is probable that Óðinn's wolves should be considered among his sorcerous familiars (see Lincoln 1979 and Jesch 2002 for more on the role of such beasts).

Another kind of helping spirit may be represented by the head of Mímr mentioned in chapter 2, which Óðinn uses as a source of predictions as the Ragnarok approaches (*Voluspá* 45). In *Sigrdrífomál* 14, Mímr's head is seen as one of the sources from which the god gains knowledge of runes, alongside his self-sacrifice in *Hávamál*. The tale is alluded to in Egill Skallagrímsson's poetry and was thus current in the tenth century, but its meaning is obscure. Especially on the later evidence of *Ynglingasaga* 7, in which the head appears in the context of Óðinn's sorcerous skills, it is possible that it embodies a dim recollection of some kind of helping spirit. However, the significance of this tale is hard to assess, running out as it does in the vast literature on other European traditions of severed heads, which may or may not be of relevance (cf. Simpson 1962; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013).

We should also consider the problematic relationship between this story and the tale of how Óðinn acquired wisdom by trading his eye for a drink from Mímir's well at the roots of the world-tree *Voluspá* 28). Some authors have identified Mímir with an aspect of Yggdrasill, and it is actually called *Mimameiðr*, 'Mími's Tree', in *Svipdagsmál*. Similarly, Mímir drinks from his well of knowledge using the Gjallarhorn, which Heimdallr will later use to herald the doom of the gods. We do not know why the head and the well-guardian have slightly different spellings of their names, and it does not help that Snorri has different versions again of these stories in *Ynglingsaga* (4), interpreted as part of the divine war, and in *Gylfaginning* (14, 50).

It is clear that the story of Mímr *is* from the Viking Age, and probably concerned a prophecying head that also had associations to both the World Tree and the Ragnarok, but for want of further evidence we must leave this as a question mark in the apparatus of Óðinn's sorcery (for a summary of work on Mím[i]r, see de Vries 1957: §176; Halvorsen 1966; Dronke 1997: 136ff). As a coda to this, it is worth mentioning John Lindow's idea (2000) that Mímr's 'head' was originally a kind of shamanic mask. This would fit with the notion of Óðinn's interrogation of it, as either the residence of a spirit or the means by which he could contact one. Lindow suggests that by the time of its appearance in the medieval literature, Mímr's head had been transformed by the Christian saga writers into a pagan 'relic', understood by them in the same sense as the relics of saints with which they were familiar.

One of the most unequivocally shamanic images found not only in Norse mythology but also in material culture is that of Óðinn's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. Most of what we know of him in detail comes from Snorri, but the horse is also mentioned in *Grímnismál*, *Hyndluljóð* and *Sigrdrífomál*. Sleipnir's name means approximately 'the sliding one', which may refer to the manner in which he moves between the worlds. His eight legs are mentioned by Snorri and in one of Gestumblindi's riddles in *Hervarar saga*. Sleipnir was grey, and his teeth were etched with runes.

As we shall see, horses and their genitals had associations with sorcery in the Viking Age, and Óðinn's stallion may be seen in this context. He was also clearly a metaphor for death. Just as the name of the World Tree, Yggdrasill, means 'steed of Yggr [*i.e.* Óðinn]', so the gallows is called *hábrjóstr horva Sleipnir*, 'high-chested rope-Sleipnir' in strophe 14 of the *Ynglingatal*. Óðinn and others ride him to the realm of the dead, and this fits well with the idea of a horse that bears the (male) deceased to his appointed place. We shall return to Sleipnir and his archaeological correlates in later chapters.

In some sources, Óðinn also takes on a role as a healer, using sorcery for this purpose in the same manner as a shaman. We see this in *Hávamál*, with the *líknargaldr*, 'healing-*galdr*', in strophe 120, and the fragmentary spell in strophe 147. These skills are made especially clear in the Second Merseburg Charm (de Vries 1957: §451–3). This Old High German spell is known from a tenth-century manuscript but is probably older, and describes how Wodan (*i.e.* Óðinn) heals the broken leg of Baldr's horse:

Phol ende Uuodan vuorun zi holza; dû uuart demo balderes volon sîn vuoz birenkit; thû biguolen Sinhtgunt, Sunna era suister; thû biguolen Friia, Volla era suister; thû biguolen Uuodan, sô hê uuola conda; sôse bênrenkî sôse bluotrenkî sôse lidirenkî; bên zi bêna, bluot zi bluoda, lid zi geliden, sôse gelîmda sîn!

Phol and Wodan rode into the wood; the foreleg of Baldr's horse was dislocated; then Sinhtgunt and Sunna, her sister, sang over it; then Friia and Volla, her sister, sang over it; then Wodan sang over it, for he could do that well; be it dislocation of bone, be it an ailment of the blood, be it dislocation of the limbs: bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limb, as if they were glued!

Text after de Vries 1957: §451; translation after Simek 1993: 278

While all these elements still hold up well as support for a 'shamanic' Óðinn, in discussing the god as a sorcerer it is equally important to dispose of misconceptions that have arisen. Some of these have emerged from the fact that at least as late as the Reformation, the figure of Óðinn played a role in practical magic of the kind recorded in the various works on the 'Black Arts' that appeared throughout Europe at this time (for example, the sixteenth-century Icelandic *Galdrabók*). The god also continued to feature prominently in Scandinavian folktales even down to the nineteenth century, most often as a demonic figure and sometimes identified with the Devil himself (see, for example, Lindow 1978: 114–6; Blecher & Blecher 1993). None of this has anything to do with the Viking Age. This perpetuation of Óðinn stories in fact conforms unremarkably to common patterns in medieval and later north European folklore and magic, and should certainly not be interpreted as a continuity of belief. Such material is wholly unreliable as a source for the religion of nearly a millennium earlier, and need not concern us further here.

Similar problems arise with another of Óðinn's attributes as a god of sorcery, namely his mastery of runic lore. The social meaning of runes has often been taken – quite wrongly – to be timeless, not only by members of archaeology's public audience and adherents of alternative religions but also by a surprisingly large number of academics. The continued use of runes in Scandinavia through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, even in some cases down to the nineteenth century in the form of runic calendars and runestaves,

in fact has almost nothing to do with the runic scripts of the Viking Age, even though some of the characters are the same (Gotland forms one of the few exceptions to this, where runic script was used on memorials even down to the 1600s – see Snædal 2002: 178–83).

We may firstly note that their very meaning is not entirely clear in the Eddic poems, as *rúnar* can indeed mean ‘runes’ in the sense of the angular letters, but it can also mean ‘secrets’ (Turville-Petre 1964: 48). It may thus be something quite different that Óðinn grasps screaming on the tree in *Hávamál* 139. In the case of Viking-Age runes proper, they are frequently cited as being ‘magical’ and imbued with arcane power, an interpretation which is given over-riding prominence regardless of the context in which the runes were employed. As R. I. Page has pointed out on numerous occasions (see, for example 1994: 100f), runes were indeed magical signs but this was only one of many uses to which they were put, most of them highly mundane. They are encountered on wooden tags serving as trade marks, as owner’s labels on a variety of objects, and effectively as a form of early medieval Post-It notes. The existence of so-called staveless runes, a kind of runic shorthand created for writing rapidly on soft surfaces, also confirms the need for such an everyday script (see Jansson 1987: 27f). Not least, runes are found throughout the Viking world in the form of opportunistic graffiti, often reflecting the same range of scatological concerns as similar writings today. Most dramatically, of course, they are found on the runestones of the later Viking Age, in contexts which may be decidedly religious (usually Christian) in tone but which probably do not involve the notion of runes as icons of power in themselves.

Of all the functions that runes performed, their magical aspect may well have been the least important. Although we do find runic inscriptions that clearly have some invocational or ritual meaning – on amulets, loose pieces of wood, and sometimes on the runestones of the early Viking period or as late as the ninth century (for example, the Rök stone from Östergötland, Ög 136) – these are nevertheless in a clear minority among runic inscriptions as whole. That said, we should not forget that we do have examples that are both powerful and compelling. Elisabeth Imer has reviewed the Danish runestone material in this light (*e.g.* 2016: 257f) and found several such texts, even speculating that a *volva* or similar connected to an aristocratic household may have been behind the inscriptions from Gørlev and Malt (*ibid*: 126ff).

The understanding of runes as magical signs ultimately rests almost entirely on the written sources, notably the mentions of them in Eddic poems such as *Sigrdrífomál*, and in narratives such as *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. These should not be ignored, but ultimately they simply confirm that runes occupied an important place within the *internal* framework of Viking-Age magic and ritual – the relevant texts are concerned with these subjects, and so it is hardly surprising that the use of runes within this specific context should be emphasised. Importantly, the texts cannot be used to draw conclusions about the relative prominence of that context in comparison with other, more banal, runic functions. This is in striking contrast to descriptions of sorcery in general, which are socially-embedded throughout the saga corpus.

Runes are discussed only incidentally in the present work, as ritual tools rather than structures of sorcery in their own right, but this point of view is of course open to question (some scholars have argued that runes played a role in magic that was second only to *seiðr* itself – *e.g.* Raudvere 2001: 90). Since the publication of the first edition, two major works have addressed the topic (McKinnell *et al.* 2004; MacLeod & Mees 2006), not only collecting the source material in a new corpus but also evaluating how runes were used in practice; that they had at least some part to play in operative sorcery, and perhaps quite a prominent one, now seems secure. In any case, their importance among Óðinn's attributes should not be under-estimated.

Óðinn's names

We are also fortunate to have one further source for the many aspects of the god – his names. Most of them have been collected by Hjalmar Falk in his crucial work *Odensheite* (1924), where they are discussed in philological detail; all subsequent study of the names begins with his survey.

In *Grímnismál* and *Gylfaginning* we receive two contradictory explanations for the quantity of Óðinn's names. The former suggests that this multiplicity of identities was deliberate, and indeed part of the god's very nature: *eino nafni hétomk aldregi/síz ek með fólkom fór*, 'by one name I have never been known / since I went among the people', says Óðinn in strophe 48. By contrast, Snorri explains that the names represent what the god was called by different peoples, in addition to deriving from events in his life. As an earlier source, *Grímnismál* may well be more authentic in reflecting Viking-Age beliefs, and it is at least clear that the names were all known at the time.

In the present discussion I shall focus on their literal meaning, and what this says about the different aspects of Óðinn's character.

In the tabulated list presented here, I have therefore divided them into various groups according to the aspects of the god that they seem to represent or embody. Many names have more than one meaning or association, while others remain completely obscure to us. Despite these caveats, at a basic level this provides a useful guide to the different forms that Óðinn assumed to those who believed in his power.

A total of 204 names are listed here (Table 3.1), based primarily on the Eddic poems, Snorri's *Edda*, the *þulur* and the skaldic verses; datings of the latter follow Finnur Jónsson's edition. The textual attributions are not exhaustive for the skaldic sources (see Meissner 1921: 251ff), but all other main texts are given. The names in Falk's list are often unprovenanced beyond an attribution to 'skaldic verses', for example, but he does include extensive discussion of alternate readings and possible copyists' errors. The list below includes more than 30 entries not found in Falk's collection, which is due to my inclusion of additional variant names and some that he omitted from saga sources. Some of these are of considerable importance, for example *Draugadróttinn* and *Hangadróttinn* from *Ynglingasaga* 7, though these may be titles rather than names. Several of the supposedly 'variant' names also appear together in the same Old Norse sources, such as the *þulur*, and so can reasonably be considered as separate names.

There are also a great many kennings for Óðinn, not included here, and I have similarly omitted names that occur only in early modern folklore and runic rhymes.

The translations are generally based on those given by Andy Orchard in his unprovenanced list of 177 Óðinn-names (1997: 188f) and Simek's dictionary (1993) which includes entries for about half the names; some translations are my own. In several instances the paucity of English equivalents for Norse words becomes obvious, as when three or four different names have the same translation. Other concepts are repeated many times – for example, there are no less than eight names which refer to Óðinn's spear. If we revive the cliché of the Inuit having a great many words for snow, it should perhaps tell us something that the Vikings found a large number of ways to describe battle, frenzy and violent death.

Table 3.1 The names of Óðinn.

Name	*Meaning*	*Sources*
DIVINITY NAMES		
Aldafǫðr	Father of Men	*Vafþrúðnismál* 4, 53; *Óðins nǫfn*; Bragi Boddason (c. 800–50), *Ragnarsdrápa* 14
Al[l]faðir	Father of All	*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 38; Arnórr Þórðarson (11th C), *Þórfinnsdrápa* 4
Al[l]fǫðr	Father of All	*Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 9, 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Bragi	Chieftain	Egill Skalla-Grímsson (936), *Hǫfuðlausn* 21
Fimbultýr	Mighty God	*Vǫluspá* 60
Goðjaðarr	God-Protector	Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 23
Ítrekr	Splendid-Ruler	*Ása heiti I*; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* 37
Jǫrmunr, Jǫrundr	Mighty One	*Óðins nǫfn*
Veratýr	God of Men	*Grímnismál* 3; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Þriði	Third	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn* Refers to his role in a divine trinity
Þriggi	Triple	Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 23; as above
WISDOM NAMES		
Blindr, Blindi	Blind	*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*: prose; *Gylfaginning* 20
Fimbulþulr	Mighty Poet, Mighty Speaker	*Hávamál* 80, 142
Fjǫlsviðr	Much-Wise	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Forn-Ǫlvir	Ancient Olvir [Most Holy One]	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hár, Háarr, Hóarr	Blind One / High One	*Vǫluspá* 21; *Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Hávi, Hóvi	High One	*Hávamál* 111
Jafnhár	Just-As-High	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Reginn	Advising One	Used in numerous man-kennings (Falk 1924: 24)
Rǫgnir, Rǫgni	Advisor	*Hyndluljóð* 35; *Óðins nǫfn*; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 28, 32
Saðr, Sannr	True One	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Einarr Gilsson (14th C), *Drápa* on Guðmundr Arason 13
Sanngetal	Truth-Guesser	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Vakr	Vigilant	*Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
'Ancient Names'		
Forn[n]i	Ancient One	*Flateyjarbók,* Ólafs *saga Tryggvasonar* 344
Hábarðr	Greybeard	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Karl	Old Man	*Gylfaginning* 49
Langbarðr	Longbeard	*Óðins nǫfn*
WAR NAMES		
Atríðr, Atriði	Attacking Rider, Attacker	*Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Biflindi	Shield-Shaker	*Grímnismál* 49; *Óðins nǫfn*
*Dǫrruðr / *Darraðr	Spear-Fighter	*Darraðarljóð*
Fráríðr	Forth-Rider	*Óðins nǫfn*
Geirdróttinn	Spear-Lord	Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 22
Geirlǫðnir	Spear-Inviter	*Óðins nǫfn*
Geirtýr	Spear-God	Sturla Þórðarson (1263-4), *Hákonarkviða* 21

Geirvaldr	Spear-Master	*Stjǫrnu-Oddadraumr*, 'Dream poems' 7
Geirǫlnir	Spear-Charger	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gunnar	Warrior	Frequent use in skaldic verse
Gunnblindi	Battle-Blind	*Óðins nǫfn*
Haptaguð	Fetter-God	*Gylfaginning* 20
Hárr	One-Eyed?	*Vǫluspá* 21; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (c. 980), *Háleygjatal* 1, 7; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 11. Used in battle kennings, e.g. *Hárs drífu*, 'Hárr's blizzard'.
Herblindi	Army-Blind	*Grímnismál* 46 (variant reading); *Óðins nǫfn*
Herfǫðr	Army-Father	*Vǫluspá* 29
Hergautr	Army-Gautr	Bragi Boddason (c. 800-50), *Ragnarsdrápa* 5; Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 11
Herjafǫðr	Army-Father	*Vǫluspá* 43; *Grímnismál* 19, 25f; *Hyndluljóð* 2; *Vafþrúðnismál* 2; *Óðins nǫfn*
Herjan[n]	Army One	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Herran	Army One	*Gylfaginning* 3
Herteitr	Army-Glad	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Hertýr	Army-God	Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 3
Hildólfr	Battle-Wolf	*Hárbarðzljóð* 8
Hjalmberi	Helmet-Wearer	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Hram(m)i	Fetterer, Ripper	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hvatmóðr	Whet-Courage	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hǫttr	Threatener?	*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 1
Kjallar	Nourisher [of carrion-eaters]	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn* and kennings
Ófnir	Inciter, Weaver	*Grímnismál* 54; *Óðins nǫfn*
Ófr	Inciter, Weaver	Sturla Þórðarson (1263-4), *Hákonarflokkr* 11
Olgr	Protector, Hawk	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sigðir, Sigþér	Victory-Bringer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sigfaðir, Sigfǫðr	Victory-Father	*Vǫluspá* 55; *Lokasenna* 58; *Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Sig-Gautr	Victory-Gautr	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sigmundr	Victory-Protection	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sighǫfundr	Victory-Author	Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 22
Sigrunnr	Victory-Tree	Ulfr Uggason (983), *Húsdrápa* 9
Sigtryggr	Victory-Sure	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sigtýr	Victory-God	*Atlakviða* 30; Glúmr Geirason (c. 970), *Gráfeldardrápa* 12
Sigþrór	Victory-Thrive	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sviðurr	Spear-God	*Grímnismál* 50; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Sviðuðr	Spear-God	*Óðins nǫfn*
Sviðrir	Spear-God	*Grímnismál* 50; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Svǫlnir	Shield-Bearer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Tviblindi	Double-Blind [the blind one who blinds]	*Óðins nǫfn*
Viðurr	Killer	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Bragi enn gamli Boddason (9th C), *Iausavísa* 2 and other skaldic verses

Yggr	Terrible One	*Grímnismál* 53f; *Hávamál* 3; *Vafþrúðnismál* 5; *Fáfnismál* 43; *Hymiskviða* 2; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn.* Employed when Óðinn announces his intention to kill
Yggiungr	Son of the Terrible One	*Vǫluspá* 28. A unique derivative of Yggr
FRENZY, TRANCE- AND ANGER-NAMES		
Bálegyr	Blaze-Eye	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Hallfrøðr Óttarsson (c. 990), *Hákonardrápa* 6; Gísli Illugason (c. 1104), *Erfikvæði* on Magnús berfœtt 1
Bileygr	Poor-Sight	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Dresvarpr	Proud-Wild?	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gapþrosnir	One in Gaping Frenzy	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gǫllnir	Battle-Screamer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gǫllor	Battle-Screamer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gǫllungr	Battle-Screamer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hengikeptr, Hengikjǫptr	Hang-Jaw	*Skálskaparmál* 43; *Óðins nǫfn*
Hjar(r)andi	Screamer	*Háttatal* 53; *Óðins nǫfn*; Bragi Boddason (c. 800-50), *Ragnarsdrápa* 11
Hnikarr, Hnikuðr	Inciter	*Grímnismál* 47f; *Reginsmál* 18f; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Hrjótr, Hrjóðr	Roarer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hveðrungr	Roarer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Óðinn	Frenzy, Frenzied One	Throughout the Old Norse corpus
Óðr	Frenzy	*Vǫluspá* 25; *Hyndluljóð* 47; *Gylfaginning* 34; *Skáldskaparmál* 20, 35; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), Øxarflokkr 2
Ómi	Boomer	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Við(h)rímnir	Contrary-Screamer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Þrasarr	Furious One	*Óðins nǫfn*
Þundr	Sweller	*Hávamál* 145; *Grímnismál* 21, 54; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
GALLOWS-NAMES		
Fjall-Geiguðr	Mountain-Dangler	*Óðins nǫfn*
Geiguðr	Dangler	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hangadróttinn	Lord of the Hanged	*Ynglingasaga* 7
Hangaguð	God of the Hanged	*Gylfaginning* 20; Hávarðr halti (1002-3), *lausavísur* 14
Hangatýr	God of the Hanged	*Skáldskaparmál* 1; Víga-Glúmr (c. 995), *lausavísur* 10; Einarr Gilsson (14th C), *Selkolluvísur* 7
Hangi	Hanging One	Tindr Hallkelsson (c. 987), *Drápa* on Hákon jarl 1
Váfuðr, Váfǫðr	Hanger, dangler	*Grímnismál* 54; *Gylfaginning* 20
Vingnir	Swinger	*Óðins nǫfn*
Vǫfuðr	Dangler	*Óðins nǫfn*
NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE DEAD		
Draugadróttinn	Lord of Ghosts	*Ynglingasaga* 7
Helblindi	Hel-Blind	*Grímnismál* 46
Hléfreyr	Mound-Lord	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hléfǫðr, Hleifruðr	Mound-Father	*Óðins nǫfn*

Valfuðr, Valfǫrðr	Father of the Slain	*Vǫluspá* 1, 27; *Grímismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Val-Gautr	Gautr of the Slain	*Óðins nǫfn*; Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson (c. 1031), Poem on Gizurr Gullbrárskáld 3
Valkjósandi	Chooser of the Slain	Kormákr Ǫgmundarson (c. 955-70), *lausavísa* 21
Valtamr	Slain-Tame	*Baldrs draumar* 6
Valtýr	Slain-God	Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (c. 980), *Háleygjatal* 15
Valþǫgnir	Slain-Receiver	Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson (c. 986) *lausavísa* 8
‘SORCERY’- AND ‘RITUAL’-NAMES		
Gǫndlir	Staff-Wielder, Sorcerer	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Jólnir	Yule-Figure	*Óðins nǫfn*; Eilífr Goðrúnarsson (c. 990), *Þórsdrápa* 12
Reiðatýr	[Cultic] Wagon-God	*Skáldskaparmál* 1
Skilfingr	One Who Lives in a Mountain	*Grímnismál* 54; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Sváfnir	Sleep-Bringer	*Grímnismál* 54; *Óðins nǫfn*; Þórbjǫrn hornklofi (10th C), *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* 11
Sveigðir	Cane-Bringer	Goþþormr sindri (10th C), *Hákonardrápa* 5
Þróttr	(Magical) Power	Frequent use in skaldic verse
ERGI-NAMES?		
Jalkr, Jalgr	Gelding	*Grímnismál* 49, 54; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 24 and other kennings
Tveggi	Double, Hermaphrodite	*Óðins nǫfn*; Egill Skalla-Grímsson (960), *Sonatorrek* 25
PLEASURE- AND TRUST-NAMES		
Glapsviðr	(Practiced) Seducer	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Njótr	User, Enjoyer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Óski	Wished-For, Desired	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn;* Óttarr svarti (c. 1018), *Óláfsdrápa sænska* 2
Unnr, Uðr	Lover, Beloved	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Þekkr	Well-Liked, Clever	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
TRICKERY-NAMES		
Bǫlverkr	Evil-Doer	*Grímnismál* 47; *Skáldskaparmál* 58; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Fengr	Snatch	*Reginsmál* 18; *Óðins nǫfn*
Gangráðr	Contrary-Advisor	*Vafþrúðnismál* 8
Ginnarr	Deceiver	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gizurr	Riddler	*Málsháttakvæði* 22; *Óðins nǫfn*
Skollvaldr	Treachery-Ruler	*Óðins nǫfn*
DISGUISE-NAMES		
Fjǫlnir	Concealer, Much-Wise?	*Grímnismál* 47; *Reginsmál* 18; *Gylfaginning* 3, 20; *Óðins nǫfn* and numerous kennings
Grímr	Mask	*Grímnismál* 46f; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Grímnir	Masked One	*Grímnismál* 47, 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Ulfr Uggason (983), *Húsdrápa* 1; Eilífr Goðrúnarsson (c. 990), *Þórsdrápa* 3; Hallfrøðr Óttarsson (late 10th C), *lausavísur* 9; Rǫgnvaldr jarl (1148), *lausavísur* 7
Hrani	Blusterer	*Hrólfs saga kraka* 26. Used as a bluff for his identity

WANDERER-NAMES

Gangleri	Wanderer	*Grímnismál* 46; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Gangráðr	Journey-Advisor	*Óðins nǫfn*
Gestr	Guest	*Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga hins helga* 106
Gestumblindi	Blind Guest	*Óðins nǫfn*; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* 9
Vegtamr	Way-Tame	*Baldrs draumar* 6, 14

SHAPESHIFTER-NAMES

Arnhǫfði	Eagle-Head	*Óðins nǫfn*
Bjarki	Little Bear?	Rǫgnvaldr jarl (1148-49), *lausavísa* 14
Bjǫrn	Bear	*Harðar saga Grímkelssonar* 15
Hrafnáss	Raven-Ás	Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni (c. 900), *Haustlǫng* 4
Hrafnaguð	Raven-God	*Gylfaginning* 38
Hrafnfreistuðr	Raven-Tester	Ulfr Uggason (983), *Húsdrápa* 10
Jólfr	Horse-Wolf, Bear	*Qrvar-Odds saga 35*
Jǫlfuðr, Jalfaðr, Jalfǫðr	Yellow-Brown-Back [Bear]	*Óðins nǫfn*
Svipall	Changeable	*Grímnismál* 47; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Qrn	Eagle	*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, strophe 38

WEATHER-NAMES

Viðrir	Weather-God, Stormer	*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*: 13; *Lokasenna* 26; *Gylfaginning* 3 and kennings

PROSPERITY-NAMES

Auðun(n)	Wealth-Friend	*Óðins nǫfn*
Farmaguðr	God of Burdens, Cargo-God	*Gylfaginning* 20
Farmatýr	God of Burdens, Cargo-God	*Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (c. 980), *Háleygjatal* 11
Farmǫgnuðr	Journey-Power	Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (c. 980), *Háleygjatal* 2
Hagvirkr	Skilful-Worker	*Óðins nǫfn*
Þrór	Thrive	*Grímnismál* 49; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*

APPEARANCE-NAMES

Brúnn, Brúni	Brown One, 'Bushy Eyebrows'	*Óðins nǫfn*; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*
Ennibrattr	One With a Straight Forehead	*Óðins nǫfn*
Hrosshársgrani	Horsehair-Moustache	*Óðins nǫfn; Gautreks saga*
Loðungr	Shaggy-Cloak-Wearer	*Óðins nǫfn*
Rauðgrani	Red Moustache	*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* 18
Siðgrani	Drooping Moustache	*Alvíssmál* 6
Siðhǫttr	Drooping Hat	*Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Siðskeggr	Drooping Beard	*Grímnismál* 48; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*
Þunnr, Þuðr	Lean, Pale	*Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*

NAMES OF UNCERTAIN ASSOCIATION

Alda-Gautr	Man-Gautr	*Baldrs draumar* 2
Eylúðr	Island-Vessel, Ever-Booming?	*Óðins nǫfn*
Fundinn	Found	Einarr Gilsson (14th C), *Drápa* on Guðmundr Arason 28
Gautr, Gauti	Götalander[1]	*Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn* and several other sources
Gautatýr	Götalander-God[1]	Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *Hákonarmál* 1
Hroptatýr	Tumult-God? Speaker of the Gods?	*Grímnismál* 54; *Hávamál* 160; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Óðins nǫfn*; Ulfr Uggason (983), *Húsdrápa* 8; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *Hákonarmál* 14
Hroptr	Tumult? Hider? Implorer?	*Vǫluspá* 59; *Grímnismál* 8; *Lokasenna* 45; *Sigrdrífumál* 13; *Óðins nǫfn*; Kormákr Ǫgmundarson (c. 960), *Sigurðardrápa* 7; Ulfr Uggason (983), *Húsdrápa* 8, 11; Þórarinn svarti (983-4), *Máhlíðingavísur* 9; Tindr Hallkelsson (c. 987), *Drápa* on Hákon jarl 9; Þórðr Kolbeinsson (1014), *Eiríksdrápa* 5
Hǫrðr	Hordalander? Hard One?	*Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum* 3
Svipdagr blindi	Blind-Dawning-Day?	*Ynglingasaga* 34, 36
Ýrungr	Raised? Stormy?	*Óðins nǫfn.* May be connected with the name of a famous Thuringian king, after whom the Milky Way was named

[1] Both Simek and Orchard translate *Gautr* and its derivatives as 'Gotlander' and 'Goth', but it is hard to see how this meaning can be derived from the Gaut- stem; on Stefan Brinks' advice (pers. comm.) I have opted for the translation 'Götalander'.

In addition to the above, Orchard (1997: 188f) has five more names for which I have been unable to find any provenances in the sources:

Aldingautr	Ancient-Gautr [Wisdom-name]
Haptsœnir	Fetter-Loosener [War-name]
Járngrímr	Iron-Grim, Iron-Mask? [Disguise-name?]
Viðfrægr	Wide-Famed [Divinity-name?]
Þrundr	Sweller [Frenzy-name]

In order of frequency, and including the unprovenanced names above in the relevant categories, we arrive at a distribution as follows:

War- and aggression	52	25%
Wisdom	23	11%
Frenzy-, trance- and anger	22	10.5%
Divinity	13	6.5%
The dead	12	6%
Shapeshifter	12	6%
The gallows	10	5%
Appearance	10	5%
Sorcery- and ritual	7	3.5%
Trickery	6	3%
Pleasure	6	3%
Prosperity	6	3%
Disguise	5	2.5%
Wanderer	5	2.5%
Ergi	3	1.5%

Weather	1	0.5%
Uncertain	11	5.5%

Obviously, the assignment of individual names to categories is subjective, and many of them have several possible associations. However, even allowing for small margins of error, it is clear that Óðinn's role as the god of war was paramount in the shape given to him through names. Only slightly less important were the two opposite poles of behaviour that tell us how the god operated on the battlefield – the wisdom of good counsel, knowledge and planning is contrasted with the frenzied abandon of the berserk rage and the sorcerous trance. The next cluster of names all concern functions, and most of these contain elements of the supernatural. Taken together, the names that reflect Óðinn's abilities as a shape-shifter, medium and questioner of the hanged make up more than 20% of the total. The remaining names represent all his other roles – as trickster, liar, seducer and outcast.

They also give us a glimpse of his appearance: a pale, thin man with bushy eyebrows, a drooping red moustache and a long beard. In the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat, the glare of his single eye can be seen.

We shall return to Óðinn later in this chapter, but for now we can turn to the Vanir gods, and consider their relationship to magic.

Freyja and the magic of the Vanir

Snorri makes it clear in *Ynglingasaga* (4) that *seiðr* was introduced to the *Æsir* by Freyja, and that from the beginning it was thought to have been a Vanir practice. Freyja has been the subject of two major monographs (Boyer 1995: 158–62; Näsström 1995: 82–5), both of which treat this aspect of her nature in some detail (see also Raudvere 2003: 99ff).

One of the first things to observe, following both Strömbäck and Näsström, is that *seiðr* is in fact the *only* kind of sorcery with which Freyja is associated. However, she seems to be a mistress not only of its divinatory aspects but also of all its other possibilities. In *Voluspá* she is strongly implicated in the malevolent sorcery that begins the divine war, and her sexual qualities seem to give this an added power. We shall return to Freyja's practice of carnal magic several times below, but here we can simply note that it is probably with this that Loki taunts her in *Lokasenna*:

Þegi þú, Freyja,
þú ert fordæða
ok meini blandin miǫk,
sítztik at broeðr þínom
stóðo blíð regin,
ok mundir þú þá, Freyja, frata!

Hold your tongue, Freyja,
you are a *fordæða*
and much mixed with evil,
for beside your brother
the blithe powers surprised you,
and then, Freyja, you farted!

Lokasenna 32; text and translation after Dronke 1997: 340

The combination of dangerous magic used for an evil purpose, and the sexual taboos of incest, are typical for the Vanir aspects of *seiðr*. In one of Egill's *lausavísur* (17), we find the name Simul, 'fainter', applied to Freyja, which Guðmundur Finnbogason has interpreted as referring to the performance of a shamanic trance ritual (1928).

A number of the *seiðr* accounts in the saga sources also have overtones of Freyja. One of these concerns the functions of the *volur*, who were often asked to predict the quality of the harvest and the coming season, which is in complete accordance with the Vanir's attributes as fertility deities. Ellis Davidson (1964: 120) has also made an interesting link between Freyja and the cat's fur used in the costume worn by the *volva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*. She argues that the special mention of catskin implies that cats may have been among the animal helping spirits employed by Þorbiorg, and that this may be related to the cats who draw Freyja's wagon according to Snorri (*Gylfaginning* 24). Similarly, in another saga account discussed in chapter 4, a Sámi *volva* in *Vatnsdæla saga* (10) characterises her prophecies as representing the will of Freyr. These two texts are unrelated compositionally, and in neither of them are any explicit links made between *seiðr* and the Vanir, a fact which makes their implicit connections the more striking. In *Skírnismál* 26, an agent of Freyr makes use of a staff of sorcery (see the section on staffs below), setting up a further association.

Snorri also alludes to the 'shamefulness' that attached to the performance of *seiðr* by men. This is discussed in detail below, but here we can briefly make a comparison between this and the obviously carnal rituals that Christian authors associated with the cult of Freyr (Adam of Bremen is a typical example here), and which are borne out in the sagas. The promiscuity ascribed to Freyja and her brother is also relevant here, as in *Lokasenna* (30):

Ása ok álfa,	Of the Æsir and elves
er hér inni ero,	who are here indoors
hverr hefir þinn hór verit.	each one has been your bed-fellow.

Lokasenna (30); text and translation after Dronke 1997: 339

Like Óðinn, Freyja could shift her shape, appearing in bird form in several sources (*e.g. Þrymskvíða* 3f), and like him one of her aspects is as the hostess of the warrior dead. In *Grímnismál* 14 we read how, *hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag*, 'half the slain she chooses every day', which also explains the name of the plains on which her hall stands – Fólkvangr, 'field of the army' or 'field of the people'. In all the accounts of Freyja in connection with *seiðr*, it should be remembered that she was also a war-deity (cf. Boyer 1995: 156ff). This may have a small reflection in burial rites. We know that valiant warrior males joined Óðinn in Valholl, but the enigmatic realm of Freyja seems the only available alternative for worthy females. This could also provide an interesting explanation for voluntary female sacrifice at funerals. Perhaps a woman could only follow her partner to the 'Viking' afterlife in Valholl through dying a violent death, and thereby ritually participating in a defining act of aggression. A similar explanation may lie behind the occasional finds of weapons in female graves (cf. Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017; Price *et al.* 2019).

While Óðinn was the undisputed master of *seiðr*, the sagas nevertheless make it abundantly clear that this kind of sorcery was conventionally the province of women. As such, the associations with Freyja and the Vanir seem to have survived long into the Middle Ages, but with a negative charge that was not present in the Viking period. Rooted in the medieval perception of female sexuality as a danger to be contained, and in the same context as the fears which contributed to the later witchcraft hysteria, we clearly see "the sinister light which played round [Freyja's] cult for the story-tellers of a Christian age" (Davidson 1964: 123).

Seiðr and Old Norse cosmology

Alongside Óðinn and Freyja, a third 'religious' context for the human practice of *seiðr* is to be found in the nature of the Norse cosmology itself.

The great epic of cosmological knowledge is *Voluspá*, to which we return throughout this book; readers are referred to Dronke's study of the poem for the detail of its mythological information (1997: 32–40). *Vafþrúðnismál* is another example of Óðinn's obsessive quest for wisdom, especially about the Ragnarok, from which we learn more of the Norse cosmological system and its mythological development. Alongside other Eddic poems such as *Grímnismál*, Snorri's *Gylfaginning* is our other primary source. The Norse cosmology of the Viking Age has already been summarised in chapter 2, and here we will focus on specific elements of relevance to the arguments of coming chapters – essentially, the major points of comparison with the cosmologies of the Sámi and the circumpolar region, and the links to sorcery.

The first of these comes with the origin of the universe, which in some interpretations actually derives from the same energies that empower the practice of magic. In the Norse cosmogony as recorded in the Eddic poems, before the creation of the worlds was only the 'yawning void', Ginnungagap (see *Voluspá* 3; Storm 1890). From an allusion to it in strophe 15 of the *Haustlong* of Þjóðólfr ór Hvinir, it seems clear that the concept dates from before the beginning of the tenth century (Dronke 1997: 114; though see North's edition, p.65, for an alternative view). Its etymology is complex and has been much discussed (cf. Dronke 1997: 112ff), but the idea of potential and immense power is clear. Its role as the primal stuff of the Norse creation has been emphasised by de Vries (1931a), who suggests that Ginnungagap can best be understood as 'the void filled with magical (and creative) powers', the latter stemming from the same root as *gandr*.

If the potential for sorcery is in same way present at the birth of the cosmos, the manner of its practice seems to have been influenced by the form that the creation took. As we have seen, at the centre of the Norse conception of the worlds was the great tree, Yggdrasill, specified as an ash in *Grímnismál* 44. It occurs in several sources, but in the nominative form only in *Voluspá*. Its etymology is of the greatest interest, combining the Óðinn-name *Yggr*, 'Terrible One' (cf. *Grímnismál* 53), with *drasill*, 'horse'. The type of horse-name is also special, because it carries strong connotations of the animal's snorting breath, with a hint of fury (Dronke 1997: 125f), so the name of the World Tree can perhaps be best translated as 'Powerful-breathing horse of the Terrible One'. Yggdrasill is clearly alive, almost sentient, at the centre of the

universe. The idea of the tree as the ‘horse’, or means of transport, of someone who moves between different worlds is something that we will encounter several times in the circumpolar belt.

Jere Fleck, in the second half of his paper on Óðinn’s self-sacrifice (1971a), has made some fascinating arguments for the location of the god on Yggdrasill at the centre of a cosmological landscape, an axis for a Norse sacred geography expressed in myths and stories.

Extending from the tree are all the realms of gods, humans and supernatural creatures. *Voluspá* 2 tells how the *volva* remembers ‘nine worlds’, associated with or equivalent to *nío íviðiur*, ‘nine wood-giantesses’. The latter are the roots of the World Tree, in the form of Heimdallr to whom they gave birth (*Hyndluljóð* 35). We find some clarification in *Vafþrúðnismál* 43:

Nío kom ek heima	Nine worlds I came through
fyr Niflhel neðan;	below Niflhel;
hinig deyia ór helio halir	into those worlds men die from Hel

Vafþrúðnismál 43; my translation There seems no doubt that the nine worlds were for the dead. The relative geography of Hel and Niflhel (‘Mist-’ or ‘Dark-Hel’) is unclear, but *Skírnismál* 35 also mentions an intermediate place for the dead in relation to the World Tree, which has its roots *fyr nágrindr neðan*, ‘below the corpse-pens’. The same phrase is used in *Lokasenna* 63 for the location of Hel, and the ‘corpse-pens’ may simply refer to graves or a fenced cemetery – the place from which the dead descend to their new home (cf. Dronke 1997: 412). In *Vafþrúðnismál*, ‘Hel’ may refer either to the grave or to the being of the same name, who will direct the dead to their appropriate place in the nine worlds.

Niflhel reappears in the second strophe of *Baldrs draumar*, but its relative location is unspecified. In *Gylfaginning* 3, Snorri places it as the *lowest* and most dreadful of the nine worlds, and in section 42 of the same text he even implies that there is something worse deeper down. Snorri seems to have imported Christian ideas here, and he also sometimes confuses Niflhel with Niflheim, a name which he almost certainly invented (Simek 1993: 232). It is at least interesting that Snorri also understood Niflhel to be somehow separate from the main realm of the dead. It is important to note too that the cosmology

of the Eddic poems is not always consistent, or at least may contain multiple meanings that appear to us as alternatives. In *Grímnismál* 31, Yggdrasill has three roots, under which live respectively Hel (the being rather than the realm?), the giants, and people. Are the three in fact clusters of the nine?

This number nine is found repeatedly in Norse mythology – as nine words in magical formulae, nine objects, nine levels of reality, but especially in connection with sorcerers or supernatural beings with nine siblings, and the nine days or nights of ordeal in some of the Óðinnic mysteries. It obviously held considerable significance for the Norse, as a number of power associated with the half-glimpsed realities of other worlds (Simek 1993: 232f; Price 2014b).

It seems clear at least that the nine worlds were synonymous with nine roots of the tree (the nine giantesses), and perhaps with Hel itself. *Voluspá* relates that these all lay deep underground, far 'lower than the buried dead' as implied by *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Lokasenna* (Dronke 1997: 412). The distance is even specified as nine leagues down, in *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 16. We get another glimpse of this in *Voluspá* 53, when Þórr takes nine great paces into death as he falls at the Ragnarok.

There is a single piece of evidence that the nine levels of the underworld were balanced by nine worlds above, but this comes from one of the twelfth-century *þulur*, *Himins heiti*, which mentions *Níu eru himnar / á hæð talðir*, 'nine are the heavens / counted on high' (cf. Dronke 1997: 110). It is impossible to say to what extent this was influenced by Christian teachings. In *Gylfaginning* 17 Snorri names three levels of heaven – the sky, Andlangr and Víðbláinn – but these almost certainly derive from the Christian *Elucidarius* and have no Viking-Age meaning (Simek 1993: 15).

Two Eddic poems also preserve a shadowy tradition of an underwater realm beneath the roots of Yggdrasill. *Voluspá* 20 describes versions of the three *nornir* as coming *ór þeim sæ, /er und þolli stendr*, 'from the lake / that lies under the tree'. *Grímnismál* 7 mentions the hall called Søkkvabekkr, *en þar svalar knego/unnir yfir glymia*, 'where cool waves echo above'. Of this nothing more is known, though Dronke (1997: 128) follows Tolley in arguing that the Norse concept ultimately lies behind the *saajvh* lakes of the Sámi and the *lovi* water-world of the Finns.

There is also slight evidence that the different worlds actually turn on the axis of the World Tree, as in *Voluspá* 5 (see Dronke's discussion of this, 1997: 116f), and this is echoed in the concept of the cosmic millstone. In his analysis of the latter image, largely based on *Grottasongr*, Tolley (1995b: 76) suggests that the World Tree is not the pivot of the mill, but the handle of the quern. The question of the worlds being arranged on a horizontal, concentric axis or in a vertical tier has been discussed by Schjødt (1990).

There are interesting parallels to the Nordic cosmology in that of the pagan Anglo-Saxons, a topic that remains curiously neglected (it is, for example, almost entirely ignored by Wilson in his 1992 overview of pre-Christian English religion; cf. Price 2010c). However, an important start on this work has been made by Bill Griffiths in his survey of *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon magic* (1996), breaking with tradition in the perceptive way in which he characterises the fluid ambiguities of such belief systems. Lacking the detailed descriptive sources of the Norse, he divides the Saxon understanding of reality into five general areas or 'worlds', each representing an aspect of their combined perception of human beings, nature and the supernatural. In the absence of more exact terminology from textual evidence, he calls them the Up World, the Dead World, the Around World, the Empty World and the Rational World (Griffiths 1996: 13–77). In the contradictions evident in the Eddic poetry, it may help to bear this flexible view of the cosmos in mind when we try to recreate how these concepts were really perceived by ordinary people in Viking-Age Scandinavia.

The tiered worlds and the tree at their centre will be encountered again when we visit the Sámi in chapter 4 and the circumpolar cultures in chapter 5. At this point, however, we can preserve this supernatural landscape as a backcloth for a continued discussion, providing the terrain and the paths over which the sorcerers of the Viking Age moved. It is now time to examine them in detail.

The performers

In his monumental study of Norse magic as mediated through the medieval literary sources, published four years after the first edition of this book, François-Xavier Dillmann identifies some 70 or so individuals described as workers of sorcery; he then follows their textual biographies in meticulous

detail, to reveal the shape of their lives from a variety of perspectives. We see them as individuals, encompassing their appearance, physical traits, intellect, character, and a peek at the nature of their souls (Dillmann 2006: 141–308); their civil and legal status in society is reviewed, including their economies and the notion of sorcery as a profession, as well as their familial and sexual lives (*ibid*: 309–456); lastly we explore how they were seen by their communities, in terms of public opinion, hostility, respect, and the rituals of burial (*ibid*: 457–586). This is illustrated by textual case studies of individuals, their actions, and consequences, coupled with the closest of philological readings, down to the reinteretation of single words, painstakingly followed over pages of forensic argument. Following the conclusions and extensive referencing, lastly the sorcerers' names, textual appearances, and cartographic placement within the settlement pattern of Iceland are listed in appendixes (*ibid*: 765–76). The wider aspects of Dillmann's arguments will be discussed in chapter 8 below, together with his scepticism towards shamanic readings of Norse magic. For now, with this corpus of sources as our foundation, we may proceed to a closer encounter with its practitioners.

As we have seen repeatedly above, the primary role in the performance of *seiðr* was played by women. It is therefore to these sorceresses that we shall turn first in examining the practitioners of Norse magic.

Since the mid-1980s an increasing and encouraging number of archaeo-historical studies have appeared which specifically concentrate on the role of women in Viking-Age society. The first book-length work to appear in this field was by Judith Jesch (1991), though we should also mention the late Christine Fell's earlier work from 1984 on women in Anglo-Saxon England, which includes a tangential look at their Scandinavian counterparts. More recently, our perspectives on Viking women have also been challenged by Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh (1998) and Eva-Marie Göransson (1999), and a great many shorter works reviewed therein. The discussions in what follows are related to the research situation up to 2002 and the publication of the first edition; the directions that Viking gender studies have taken since then, in part responding to the renewed discussion of women and magic, are reviewed in outline in chapter 8.

In the present context we can note that the sagas of Icelanders contain a large number of descriptions of women, which according to the Scandinavian-

American scholar Jenny Jochens (1996: xi) present them in five distinct social •roles: young girls who occasionally exercised the right to refuse or accept a ••suitor in marriage housewives engaged in reproduction and production •divorcees who had initiated the legal proceedings and left their spouses •widows with substantial personal property sorceresses She further notes that at different times almost all these categories of women function in the saga narratives as ‘whetters’, who incite men to actions of violent revenge. Further images can be added from the *fornaldarsögur*, including shield-maidens and female warriors, and even maiden ‘kings’; female giants and trolls appear in the legendary sagas (Jochens 1996: xii).

In two important and comprehensive works, *Women in Old Norse Society* (1995) and *Old Norse Images of Women* (1996), Jochens argues for a broad two-fold division of Nordic womanhood, essentially corresponding to a reality and a literary ideal. The sorceresses, whetters and ‘women of blood’ fall largely into the latter group in Jochens’ opinion, and she has argued that many of these figures do not reflect actual conditions in either the pre-Christian period of the sagas’ action or the medieval world of their composition. The majority of these characters are instead what she calls “female images … formed in men’s imagination” (1996:xii).

Up to a point this is an obvious contention, given the presumably male filter of the written sources’ creation, though we should remember that the gender of the saga-writers is not entirely clear-cut. However, it is a matter of debate whether the roles assigned to women in the Old Norse texts reflect male fantasy or a medieval echo of a Viking-Age reality. As an obvious example, we know that the early centuries of the Icelandic settlement really were riven by blood feud and internecine strife (cf. Byock 1982, 1988), and ‘whetting’ women are implicated in this social pattern equally with men.

The following discussion, like much of this book, is primarily concerned with the ‘real’, living women of Viking society and their engagement in the religious activities of the time. However, and in contrast to Jochens’ approach, these are set against the background of contemporary mythological or cosmological perceptions of women which I do not agree can be separated from the ‘real world’ in the way that she has done. Both the female figures represented in the mythological texts and their human counterparts should instead be treated as different but necessarily linked aspects of the world-view

that I have discussed in earlier chapters, and will be considered in that light here. In reviewing the different categories of sorceresses below, and in the subsequent discussion of men and magic, we should remember that both ‘image’ and ‘reality’ were different products of the same social intelligence, the same sophisticated Viking mind.

Witches, seeresses and wise women

The notion of women as the leading practitioners of sorcery seems to have long antecedents among the Germanic peoples, with female seers mentioned by Classical writers such as Tacitus, Dio Cassius and Strabo (the sources are summarised by Simek 1993: 279f, 356f, 370f; the Germanic prophetesses have attracted an extensive literature and are discussed by Closs 1936, Naumann 1938, Volkmann 1964, Derolez 1968 and Simek 2015). Some of the names of these women have survived, such as Albruna and Veleda (Guarducci 1946; Keil 1947; Krahe 1960: 39–43; Meid 1964), and there have been fruitful attempts to connect them with archaeological evidence of sacrifice (*e.g.* Dobat 2009). It is interesting that some of them are etymologically related to words for 'staff' – for example Waluburg, Ganna and Gambara (Schröder 1919). As we shall see this is continued in the Old Norse sources for the Viking Age, when this aspect of sorcery connected with divination and clairvoyance seems to have lived on the figures of the *volur* that we have seen above.

The common features of these women have been usefully summarised by Katherine Morris (1991: 173), when she writes that "magic was manipulative, practical, and achieved immediately. The sorceress changed the weather, cast spells, or controlled things outside of herself". Here we can examine the collective and individual traits found in the descriptions of these people, and other kinds of sorceress, and further examples can be found throughout the book.

Volur and seiðkonur

There seems to be little to distinguish between the *volur*, 'staff-bearers', and another type of sorceress called *seiðkonur*, '*seiðr*-women', and the terms are often used interchangeably of the same individuals. The *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP) word-list notes 23 citations of *volur* and its derivatives in the Old Norse prose texts, and 8 for *seiðkonur.* Most of the sources in which these women appear are summarised by Halvorsen (1976b; cf. McKinnell 2005b: 95–108).

The *volur* were part of the *seiðr* debate from the very beginning in Viking studies. We find them in Fritzner (1877: 195–7, 199) and Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 80), for example, with more recent overviews by Steinsland (1985a & b), Kress (1993: 30–50) and Raudvere (2003: 99–170). The archetypal

description of a *volva* is undoubtedly that from *Eiríks saga rauða*, quoted in the previous chapter and detailing the visit paid by the seeress Þorbiorg to a Greenland farm. This passage contains most of the conventions associated with these women: the touring seeress visiting each homestead in turn to answer questions about the future, personal fortune and the health of the crops; the special equipment of a platform, staff and other items; the 'choir' of assistants; the spirits in attendance.

Firstly, the idea that the *volur* were peripatetic recurs in several sources. The most seminal is perhaps *Voluspá*, when in strophe 22 we read how the seeress Heiðr was hailed *hvars til húsa kom*, 'at all the houses she came to'. A similar social round is made by the *volva* Oddbiorg in *Víga-Glúms saga* 12, discussed below. In *Orvar-Odds saga* (2), the episode of divination begins when the *volva* and *seiðkona* is sent for by a farmer who hears that she is visiting in the district; in *Eiríks saga rauða* (4) the episode ends when an escort arrives from another farm to invite the *volva* to visit them next.

The archaeologist Eva-Marie Göransson has focused on the idea that the *volur* possessed a very different social status than other women, and argues that they were endowed with a dignity almost commensurate with that of a skald (1999: 177, 179; cf. Kabell 1980). As we have seen in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the *volur* were received with a notably superior form of hospitality, and a similarly 'magnificent feast' is prepared for the *volva* Heiðr in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3). The same pattern of a travelling *volva* invited to feast is seen in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* from *Flateyjarbók*, and in *Orvar-Odds saga*. In *Norna-Gests þáttr* all of this is actually given a pseudo-historical tone. The story concerns a man who has been cursed to live for centuries, and in looking back over his life he describes how things used to be in pre-Christian days:

Þar foru þa um landit uoluur er kalladar uoru spakonur ok spadu monnum alldr. Þui budu menn þeim ok geordu þeim ueitzslur ok gafu þeim giafir at skilnade.

At that time there were *spákonur* who used to travel through the land, called *volur*, and they would tell people's fortunes. That's why people used to invite them to feasts and give them gifts when they left.

Norna-Gests þáttr 291; translation after Herman Pálsson & Edwards 1985: appendix 1

He describes sorceresses coming to visit in groups of three, of differing age, and with an ability not only to predict an individual's fate but actually to determine it (it is one such woman who curses the man to longevity). Here the *volur* have been ascribed attributes of the *nornir*, to say nothing of the various European traditions of the Fates, and indeed later in the passage they are actually called by the former name (cf. Strömbäck 1935: 87–90).

The idea that being a *volva* conveyed almost a professional status has been discussed by Kress (1993) amongst others. In some instances they are clearly paid for their services, above the bed and board that they also received. There is a suggestion that the *volva* and *seiðkona* Hulð was recompensed for her sorcerous aid in *Ynglingasaga* (13–14), and we find a similar pattern in *Friðþjófs saga* (5). Again, in *Hrólfs saga kraka* 3, Heiðr receives a gold ring for her prophecy, this time as an incentive for her to adjust it so as to be favourable to the giver (see below). Even Óðinn himself makes the *volva* a gift of jewellery in *Voluspá* (29).

There are several signs in the early sources that such women were not held to be generally trustworthy, and that they were thought of as rather disreputable company. We see this in *Voluspá* 22, in the closing lines that refer to the *volva* Heiðr, *æ var hón angan/illrar brúðar*, 'she was always the favourite of wicked women [or: 'an evil wife']'. McKinnell (2001: 402ff) has a long discussion of what is meant by *brúðar* here, concluding that something far more sinister is meant than merely a bad-tempered housewife. With reference to a wide range of sources, he argues convincingly that the *Voluspá* poet is making a complex package of allusions to the brides of giants, dwarfs and *berserkir*, to troll-women, to the illicit sexual partners of gods, and to harbingers of death – in other words, the *volur* keep very bad company indeed.

The advisability of caution in one's dealings with them is also evident in the Eddic poems. In *Hávamál* 87, for example, a list of objects or circumstances of which one should be suspicious includes the phrase *volu vilmæli*, 'a *volva* who prophecies good'. This rather surprising advice becomes clearer when looking at further sources, in which it is obvious that the *volur* were often expected only to predict good things and to avoid mentioning the bad.

This idea of social isolation is repeated in many other situations, some of them dramatic. We may think, for example, of the *volva*'s burial place in

Baldrs draumar (4), which lies *outside* the gates of Niflhel: *Þá reið Óðinn fyr austan dyrr, / þar er hann vissi volo leiði*, ‘Then Óðinn rode by the eastern doors, / where he knew the *volva*’s grave to be’ (tr. Larrington 1996: 243). Given the possibility of Niflhel as a kind of intermediate place for the dead, the siting of the seeress’s resting place on its border serves only to reinforce the sense of someone who moves in the most extreme of liminal zones. A similar pattern is seen in *Grógaldr* 1, where the deceased *volva* also lies *þik dauðra dura*, ‘by the door of the dead’.

This again may have been related to their status, as expressed in the manner of their reception. Göransson (1999: 209) has compared the feasting at the *volva*’s arrival to the images on wall-hangings like those from Oseberg and Överhogdal. She argues that the two contexts both reflect the same form of ‘loaded ritualised situations’ that are created through a formal meal with spiritual overtones. It is clear that such events could have a number of different outcomes.

A drily humorous example comes from *Víga-Glúms saga* (12), in which the *volva* Oddbiorg has a reputation for suiting her prophecies to the level of hospitality she receives, with the result that special care is taken to welcome her appropriately. The mistress of the house to which she comes requests a prediction about her sons’ future, but oversteps the social mark by adding *ok spá vel*, ‘and make it something nice’ (in McKinnell’s effectively colloquial translation from 1987). When the *volva*’s response is less than enthusiastic, her host accuses her of mockery and of being unsatisfied with the reception she has received. Oddbiorg replies that the quality of her welcome will not make any difference to her predictions, but she is then told to keep quiet if she cannot find something positive to say. Moved to anger, Oddbiorg then reveals her true vision, which foresees calamity in the boys’ lives.

We can note that much the same expectations are applied to Þorbiorg in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Through this and similar descriptions, it emerges that at least by the time of the sagas the *volur* were thought to have had a very definite social function, that we might characterise as ‘ritual reassurance’. Interestingly, they are perceived as having a *genuine* ability to see the future, but are nevertheless expected to censor and tailor their insights to fit their audience’s requirements. In many respects, this too comes very close to the

communal pressures brought to bear on circumpolar shamans, as we shall see in chapter 5.

We see a similar pattern expressed in a much more serious context in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3), which along with *Eiríks saga* provides the 'type example' of a *seiðr* performance, and is again worth quoting in full. In the early part of the saga, Fróði has murdered his brother King Hálfdan, and proclaimed himself ruler of Denmark. Hálfdan's sons, Helgi and Hróarr, have survived and gone into hiding among Fróði's people using the assumed names Hamr and Hrani. The king is now seeking them, intending to eliminate any rivals to his usurped throne, and decides to employ sorcery to establish their whereabouts. In the audience also sits Signý, who is Hálfdan's daughter and the sister of the two boys, and who is desperate to avoid the revelation of their hiding place in the hall:

Volua ein var þar kominn sem Heydur hiet. Hana bad k(ongur) ad neyta listar sinnar og vita huad hun kynni as s(eigia) til sueinanna. Giordi hann þä gillda veitslu j moti henni, og setti hana áá seidhiall einn häfan. K(ongur) sp(urdi) þáá huad hun sægi til tydinda, þui eg veit s(eigir) hann ad nu mun margt fyrir þig bera, og sie eg nu mikla giæfu áá þier og suara mier sem skiotast. Hun slær þä j sundur kiaptinum og geyspar miog og vard liodur áá munni, Tueir eru menn, tru eg huorugum þeir er vid ellda ytrir sitia.

Kongur m(ællti), huort eru þad sueinarnir eda þeir sem þeim *hafa biargad. Hun suarar, Þeir er j Vijfilz ey voru leingi, og hietu þar hunda nofnum, Hoppur og Ho.

Og j þui kastadi Signi til hennar gullhryngi. Hun vard glod vid sendingina og vill nu afbregda. Þui vard nu so s(agdi) hun, og er þetta lygd ein er eg seigi, og villist nu miog spáádomur minn allur. Kongur m(ællti), þig skal pijna til sgana ef þu villt ei þiggia hid betra, og veit eg nu ecki gior enn ädur, j so miklu fiolmenne huad þu seigir, eda þui er Sygni eij j sæti s(ijnu), og kann vera ad hier rädi vargar med vlfum. Kongi var sagt ad Sygni væri siuk ordinn af reyk beim sem legdi af ofninum. Sæuill jall bidur hana ad sitia vpp og bera sig hraustliga, þui margt kann ad verda sueinn(unum) til lijfz, ef þad áá til ad vilia, og lättu sem syst finna áá þier huad sem þier þikir þui vær meigum ecki ad hafats ad so bunu ad hialpa þeim. Fr(odi) k(ongur) herdir nu ad seidk(onnuni) fast og bidur hana ad seigia ed sanna ef hun skuli ecki pijnd verda. Hun gapir

þä miog, og verdur henni erfidur seidurinn, og nu kuad hun vijsu, Sie eg huar sitia, sinir Hal(danar), Hroar og Helge, heilir bäder.
Þeir munu Froda, fiorui ræna, nema þeim sie fliott til farid, enn þad mun eigi verda seigir hun. Og eptir þetta stiklar hun ofan af seidh(iallinum) og kuad, Autul eru augu, Hamz og Hrana, Eru odlingar, vndra diarfir.

Then a *volva* came who was called Heiðr. The king asked her to use her art and to say what she could learn about the boys. He had a magnificent feast prepared for her coming, and set her upon a high *seiðr*-platform [*seiðhjallr*]. The king then asked what she could see of the future, ‘because I know’, he said, ‘that now much will be made clear to you, and I see you have great luck about you, so answer me as fast as you can.’ Then she wrenched open her jaws and yawned deeply, and this chant emerged from her mouth, Two are the men, I trust in neither, who by the fireside sit in splendour.

The king spoke up, ‘Do you mean the boys, or those who helped them?’. She answered: They that were a long time on Vífill’s island, and there were hailed with hounds’ names, Hopp and Ho.
[These words refer to earlier actions of the boys, thus confirming Heiðr’s identification of them.] And just then Signý threw her a gold ring. She was pleased with the gift and now wanted to break off. ‘This is how matters stand’, she said, ‘What I said is only a lie, and my prophecies have all gone astray’. The king said, ‘You will be tortured into speaking, if you do not choose more wisely. Here among such a crowd of followers, I still do not understand what you are saying any better than before. And why is Signý not in her seat? Can it be that here wolves are plotting with wolves?’ The king was told that Signý had become ill from the smoke that rose from the hearth. Jarl Sævill [Signý’s husband] asked her to sit up and bear herself with courage, ‘for it can have much bearing on keeping the boys alive, if that is fated to be. Act in such a way that your thoughts cannot be perceived, for at the moment there is nothing we can do to help them’. King Fróði now pressed the *seiðkona* hard, and told her to tell the truth if she did not want to be tortured. She yawned deeply then, but the *seiðr* was difficult, and at last she chanted this verse: I see where they sit, sons of Hálfdan, Hróarr and Helgi, healthy both.
They will rob Fróði of life.

‘Unless they are quickly forestalled, but that will not happen’ she said. And after that she leaped down from the *seiðhjallr* and chanted: Hard are the eyes of Hamr and Hrani.
They are princes wonderfully bold.

Hrólfs saga kraka ch. 3; translation after Byock 1998 and Jones 1961, with my amendments

In response to the *seiðkona*’s words, the two boys run from the hall and make their escape to the forest, from which they later return and murder the king. The sorceress herself also runs from the hall, presumably fleeing for her life, and is not mentioned again in the saga.

The context and pattern of events here are striking. Throughout the episode, the *volva* appears as amoral and independent, distanced from the situation except where her personal welfare is involved. For payment she is quite prepared to deliver the boys to their uncle whom she knows will kill them, but then reverses her attitude when she is given a greater reward in the form of Signý’s gold ring. In understanding how to respond to Signý’s gesture, the *volva* also shows that she is fully aware of the political context and of what hangs upon her words. Finally, she responds to Fróði’s direct threat to her by prophesying his own death – in a sense, by her actions she actually brings about his end, because the boys whom she helps to escape later return and immolate Fróði in the very same hall. Heiðr’s reaction to attempted coercion is thus the same as that of Oddbiorg in *Víga-Glúms saga*: she does the opposite of what is demanded of her. What is interesting too is the difficulty of the second *seiðr* performance. Firstly, it seems that before this Heiðr genuinely does not know the new identities of the boys or their fate, only that they are somewhere in the hall – in other words the saga writer is suggesting that all this information really was a result of her trance, regardless of the circumstances. Secondly, it is evident that the performance became harder if the performer was not comfortable.

A clue to the source of the *volur*’s power is found in the Eddic corpus where they appear as the first of three types of sorcerers whose progenitors are listed in *Hyndluljóð* (33): *Ero volor allar frá Viðólfi*, ‘All the *volur* are descended from Viðólfr’. The name of the head of their line, Viðólfr, means ‘Wood-wolf’, and this has sometimes been identified as the sorcerer ‘Vitolfus’

described by Saxo (VII: 183). However, as Strömbäck points out (1935: 28f) this does not fit with Saxo's usual rendition of the ð sound, and he suggests that the Eddic word is a scribal error for *Vittólfr*, which would fit with Saxo. The reason for such a connection, if such it is, remains unexplained beyond the sorcerous connotations of *vitt*. Saxo's Vitolfus is an ex-soldier who has taught himself the power to heal and harm, and also to confuse his opponents with illusions and temporary blindness, and as such has several parallels in the saga sources (for example the character of Vífill in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, discussed below, and of course Óðinn himself).

In other contexts, the *volur* also occasionally appear in kennings – thus a wave of the sea is described as *Gymis volva*, 'Gymir's volva', in Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson's travel-poem *Ferðavísur* from the early eleventh century (Gymir is a giant synonymous with the sea). Other examples have been collected by Meissner in his *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (1921).

By the time of the later medieval compositions we find the seeresses appearing as stock motifs, assisting the hero out of his difficulties or issuing prophecies which determine the structure of the tale – for example, Heimlaug volva in *Gull-Þóris saga* (18–19). These echo the earlier saga descriptions, but contribute little of note to our understanding of the *volur*, though there are exceptions which are considered below.

Spákonur, spámeyjar, spákerling

A further category is the *spákona* ('prophecy woman/ wife'), which occurs 22 times in the prose sources according to the ONP listings. Variations of this include *spámeyja* ('prophecy-maiden'), and *spákerling*, an 'old prophecy woman'. Again, these terms are sometimes used in conjunction with *volva* and *seiðkona* to describe a single woman, but they are also found on their own.

In *Vatnsdæla saga* (44) we read of a *spákona* Þórdís, of whom we are told that *hon var mikils verð ok margs kunnandi*, 'she was a worthy woman and wise in many ways'. She was sufficiently esteemed that the mountain behind her home was named after her – Spákonufell. She plays a minor role in several other tales, such as *Kormáks saga* (9, 22–3) and *Heiðavíga saga*, in each case helping the central figures to work out their problems. Despite her 'title' she does not practice divination, but instead performs various unspecified forms of sorcery. There is every possibility that she is a purely literary figure and descriptions of her therefore need to be used with caution, but the detail of her

actions (particularly involving a staff – see below) should at least be considered as a possible survival from an earlier story.

The term also appears in a curious tenth-century kenning for arrows in flight, which occurs in strophe 7 of Þórarinn svarti's *Máhlíðingavísur* from 983–4. The complex phrase *hjaldrs Þruðar vangs þings spámeyjar* combines two elements, the first of which means simply 'battlefield' ('the *þing*-field of fighting-Þrúðr [a *valkyrja*]') while the second is *spámeyjar*. Like the *seiðr*- and *galdr*-kennings, Strömbäck (1935: 119f) sees this as alluding to a battle-song, and Meissner (1921: 145) sees it as a specific reference to the singing of a *seiðr* ritual. An alternative would be to interpret the *spámeyjar* in the sense of those who send out an aspect of themselves, flying high and fast to distant places in order to gather the information they require. If we follow this line, then just as the gathering-place of a *valkyrja* in combat is a battlefield, so the *spámeyjar* speeding over it are the showers of arrows: thus arrows are the '*spámeyjar* of battle'.

Vísendakonur

The term *vísendakona*, meaning 'wise woman' or 'woman who knows', is also found in the sagas, either alone or in conjunction with similar terms. Þorbiorg in *Eiríks saga rauða* is both a *volva*, *spákona* and *vísendakona*, for example. In a sense this should not surprise us, and it may have been that at least by the time of the sagas' composition there was little to choose between such terms – just as today words like 'witch', 'sorceress' and so on all mean much the same in popular use. The ONP listings contain 8 references to the term in the prose sources, and F. S. Scott (1985) has published a useful case study of these women using examples from *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Galdr-women

As with the terms for sorceresses apparently specialising in *seiðr*, prophecy (*spá*-) and so on, in the sources we also find examples of women performing *galdr*. There are several variants of these *galdrakonur*, '*galdr*-women', such as *galdrakerling*, 'old-*galdr*-woman', and *galdrasnót*, '*galdr*-lady'. However, they are infrequent by comparison with the other terms, with only 5 ONP citations in total. As with the *seiðr*- constructions, the *galdr*- terms are also found in combinations, used to describe the same individual. In this context we should remember Snorri's description of Óðinn's powers in *Ynglingasaga* 7,

and the division between *galdr* and *seiðr* employed for different but specific purposes.

One further term, also used of mortal sorceresses, is more puzzling. This is *galdrakind*, perhaps something like '*galdr*-creature', which appears to have had negative connotations. As with similar terms in the other categories, this may have reflected the use of *galdr* for evil.

**Vitka*

We can also consider a problematic word, **vitka*, which also seems to have been a term for a kind of sorceress. The word has no definite attestment in the sources, but it has been reconstructed from an allusion in *Lokasenna* 24, when Lóki accuses Óðinn of having travelled over the world *vitka líki*, 'in the guise of a *vitka*'. This appears to be a feminine form of the male term *vitki* (see below), and probably has links to the 'Wecha' mentioned by Saxo (III: 72) as a name for Óðinn in female disguise (Strömbäck 1935: 25f). We have little more to go on than this, but it seems as if the role of **vitka*/*vitki* was open to both sexes. Nothing is known of their specific ritual specialism, if any.

Heiðr

This term occurs both as a category of sorceresses in its own right and as a personal name, especially for *volur*. As a noun for sorceress, *heiðr* occurs some 66 times in the prose sources, according to the ONP word-lists. As a personal name, it is found twice in the Eddic poems, in *Hyndluljóð* and as the new name taken by the sorceress Gullveig in *Voluspá* 22, in the context of the war between the divine families. Both of these probably refer to the association of the name with the female practice of sorcery.

John McKinnell (2001) has published a comprehensive survey of Heiðr references in the written sources, and notes that the name is given to *volur* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna, Hauks þáttr hábrókar* and *Landnámabók*. Among several recurring traits in the *heiðr* episodes, McKinnell notes that only one of the named women does *not* prophecy, and also that there seems to be a connection between them and the far north, perhaps with the Sámi (2001: 398).

The etymology of *heiðr* is interesting, and it has been argued as evidence that the *volva* tradition is of very great antiquity in the North (Dronke 1997: 131f). It has connotations of unenclosed, uninhabited, high and treeless land,

and is related to the modern English ‘heath’ and ‘heathen’ (the same is true for modern Swedish, *hed* and *hedning*; cf. O. N. *heiðinn*, see Trier 1949). As a term *heiðr* would thus mean approximately ‘one who belongs to the old settlements of the land, within the old boundaries’ (Dronke 1997: 131). In some contexts, the name also has other connotations, including radiance and golden light, honour and payment (Palmér 1931). Dronke has suggested that these reflect important attributes of the *volva*’s welcome and reward at the homesteads she came to (see also McKinnell 2001: 400).

Fordæða and other ‘witches’

Besides the ‘technical’ terms for Nordic sorceresses, we also find a small group of highly derogatory terms. These include *fordæða*, *flagð(kona)*, *fála*, *hála*, *gýgr* and *skass*, all with an approximate meaning of ‘witch’ with a range of negative connotations that include sexual licence, ugliness, stupidity and outright evil (see Noreen 1924 for more on the concept of the witch in the early medieval North).

These words are not only applied to human sorceresses but also to giantesses, she-trolls and other supernatural creatures. In some instances, such as *flagð*, the terms can be used as nouns for these beings. They also occur with relative frequency in the sources: some 39 listings for *flagð* and 21 for *flagðkona* are recorded in the ONP, with 16 for *fordæða*.

For the mortals, a typical example comes from *Sigrdrífomál*, among the *valkyrja*’s list of advice:

> Þat ræð ek þér it fiórða:
> ef býr fordæða,
> vammafull, á vegi,
> ganga er betra,
> en gista sé,
> þótt þik nótt um nemi.

That I advise you fourthly: if a *fordæða* lives, full of malice, on your road, better to walk by, than to be her guest, though night overtake you.

Sigrdrífomál 26; translation after Larrington 1996, with amendments

The same word is used of Freyja, when Loki insults her in *Lokasenna* 32, quoted above. Similarly, in strophe 38 of *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I*, a woman earlier referred to as a *volva* is described as a *skass*, unnatural and stirring up trouble among Óðinn’s warriors in Valholl. The sorceress is taunted

by the *ulfheðinn* Sinfjotli as having given birth to nine wolves, fathered by him.

As a category, many of these words belong to the later sources, when sorceresses had taken on a fairytale quality as evil witches, but the number of earlier examples cannot be ignored. Because the terms are never used to refer to specific types of practitioner in the same way as those for *seiðr*, *galdr* and the rest, it seems likely that they are a reflection of the general disquiet and mistrust that the *volur* and their kind aroused in the communities that nevertheless needed their skills.

Fjolkyngiskonur

We can also make a brief note on the most general of the sorceress terms, found very frequently in the sources. The word *fjolkyngiskona* seems to have meant simply ‘sorceress’, in line with the generic use of *fjolkyngi* for this type of unspecified magic. The languages of the Viking Age were highly nuanced, more so than modern English in many ways, and it is not surprising that their vocabulary should include a term of this kind.

The names of Nordic witchcraft

In his survey of mythological stories connected with *heiðr*, John McKinnell has also compiled a very useful summary of some of the sorceresses’ names, analysed as to their etymological meaning and context (2001: 400ff). The meanings of the names add a further dimension to the practice of sorcery, and I reproduce them here following McKinnell’s discussion: Busla related to the poetic verb *bysja*, ‘to gush’?

- *Bósa saga* 2, 5; chants a verse threatening disaster to a king Gríma ‘mask’, ‘cowl’, ‘night’
- *Laxdæla saga* 35–37; sorceress *Fóstbræðra saga*; two sorceresses Gróa derived from the verb *gróa*, ‘to grow’
- *Svipdagsmál* 1–6; a *volva* woken from the dead to chant nine *galdrar*
- *Skáldskarpamál* 17; a sorceress who tries to heal Þórr *Gongu-Hrólfs*
- *saga* 2; a sorceress who teaches magic to a child *Vatnsdæla saga* 36; a sorceress who predicts her own death Hulð related to the verb *hylja*, ‘to conceal’
- *Ynglingasaga* 13–14; a *seiðkona* and *volva* in Finnmark possibly the subject of a lost Huldar saga, referred to by Sturla Þórðarson Hyndla

‘little bitch’

- *Hyndluljóð*; a giantess who provides sorcerous prophecy Two of these names clearly refer to concealment, either by nature or costume. In the case of Busla and Gróa, their names possibly resonate with the idea of the mind expanding, just as Óðinn begins to quicken as he hangs on the tree. McKinnell notes a parallel for the idea that ‘little bitches’ is a synonym for ‘idle thoughts’, in other words that this also may refer to the free mind (2001: 402).

Women and the witch-ride

A special category of terms for female sorcerers relates to an act of ‘riding’, which can be interpreted in several ways (Strömbäck 1935: 167–92; Solheim 1964).

In one of its senses, this refers to a kind of supernatural attack, often on a sleeping human, in which a sorceress or some other being ‘rides’ the victim, causing varying degrees of discomfort ranging from uneasy dreams to injury and outright death. This is the same kind of activity for which the *maran*, the ‘Nightmare’ is synonymous (see Raudvere 1993: 107–35), but it was also undertaken by mortals.

The classic example from the prose sources occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga* 16, and concerns a sorceress’s act of jealous revenge. Some background is first required to understand the course of events. A young man, Gunnlaugr, has been visiting a woman called Geirríðr, who is known to be skilled in sorcery and willing to teach her skills to him. On his visits he is often accompanied by the son of another sorceress, Katla, at whose farm he always calls on his return journey home from Geirríðr’s. On several occasions Katla insinuates that Gunnlaugr has a sexual relationship with Geirríðr, which he denies, and it is quickly apparent that it is in fact Katla herself who has her eye on him. On his way home after every visit, Katla always asks him to stay the night, and he always refuses. One day while visiting Geirríðr, the latter becomes worried that something will happen to Gunnlaugr on his way back, saying that there are spirits abroad and that he does not have the look of *hamingja* (*i.e.* luck) about him. Gunnlaugr ignores her advice and sets out for home, calling in at Katla’s on the way to drop off her son who has again accompanied him. She too asks him to stay, but when he insists on getting home she tells him to go on, *sem hann hefir fyrir sér gort*, ‘and face what’s coming to him’. The text continues:

Gunnlaugr kom eigi heim um kveldit, ok var um rœtt, at hans skyldi leita fara, en eigi varð af. Um nóttina, er Þorbjorn sá út, fann hann Gunnlaug son sinn fyrir dyrum; lá hann þar ok var vitlauss. Þá var hann borinn inn ok dregin af honum klæði; hann var allr blóðrisa um herðarnar, en hlaupit holdit af beinunum; lá hann allan vetrinn í sárum, ok var margrœtt um hans vanheilsu; flutti þat Oddr Kotluson, at Geirríðr mun hafr riðit honum, segir, at þau hefði skilit í stuttleikum um kveldit; ok þat hugðu flestir menn at svá væri.

Gunnlaugr did not come home that evening, and there was talk of making a search for him, but nothing came of it. During the night, Þorbjorn looked out and saw his son Gunnlaugr by the door; he lay there and was unconscious. Then he was carried in and his clothes removed. He was scratched all over his shoulders, and the flesh had been ripped to the bone. His injuries kept him in bed for the rest of the winter, and there was a lot of talk about his illness. Then Oddr Kotluson said that Geirríðr must have ridden him, because he had parted from her so abruptly that night, and most people agreed that this was what must have happened.

Eyrbyggja saga 16; translation after Herman Pálsson & Edwards 1989: 47f, with my amendments

Geirríðr is then charged with being a *kveldriða*, an ‘evening-rider’, but is acquitted at the *þing*. Much later, Katla is revealed as having been the one who rode Gunnlaugr, angry at his rejection of her. In another account of the same incident, in *Landnámabók*, Gunnlaugr does not survive the attack (see Strömbäck 1935: 167f and Raudvere 1993: 78– 82 for more on this incident).

These *kveldriður* also appear in the law codes as *trollriður*, ‘riders of witchcraft’, and the link to sorcery is clear (NGL I: 403, II: 308, 326). Similar terms – such as *myrkriða*, ‘darkness-rider’ or ‘night-rider’, and *munnriða*, ‘mouth-rider’ – are found as the names of giantesses and troll-women in the *þulur*, but are similarly used as terms for mortal women. *Myrkriður* are mentioned in *Hárbarðzljóð* 20, as a collective noun for a number of witches whom Óðinn has seduced.

The first sense of ‘riding’ supposes a shift of shape when the sorceress takes on the form of another being to attack a victim, but in some instances this moves into another understanding of the term. Sometimes these ‘riders’ are

literally mounted on supernatural beings, often a wolf. This appears in some of the kennings for this animal, such as *leiknar hestr*, ‘giantess’s steed’, and *kveldriðuhestr*, ‘evening-rider’s steed’ (Meissner 1921: 124f).

Freyja herself, the goddess of *seiðr*, seems to follow the same pattern, when in *Hyndluljóð* (5–7) she rides on a boar. This creature is itself sorcerous in nature, since it is in fact a human warrior who has attracted Freyja’s (possibly sexual) attention and whom she has caused to be transformed into the wild pig Hildisvíni, ‘Battle-Swine’. She speaks to the giantess Hyndla, alluding to her stable full of wolves, and suggests that they stage a race.

A similar rider of this kind may be depicted on stone 3 from Hunnestad in Skåne (DR 284; Fig. 3.1), which together with seven other stones from the same site once comprised the most impressive runic monument in Viking-Age Denmark after those at Jelling (Jacobsen & Moltke 1941: 271; 1942: 347f). A total of eight stones were illustrated by Worm in the 1600s (Fig. 3.2). These comprised two runestones, both surviving today, of which one has a cross design and the other shows a man armed with an axe; three undecorated stones, all now lost; and three decorated stones without runic inscriptions, of which one (stone 3) survives today, the others bearing images of a wolf beside a large face-mask, and a ‘great beast’ of the kind known from the Mammen and Ringerike styles. The runic inscriptions seem to be sequential, in which two men first commemorate two sons of a certain Gunnarr, and then one of the men raises a stone to the other who has presumably since died. The second inscription reveals that he too was Gunnarr’s son.

The textless stone 3 shows a humanoid figure astride what appears to be a wolf, using a snake for reins; another snake is held in the figure’s free hand. Both the clothes and the bodily details of the figure are androgynous, but by comparison with a description from *Gylfaginning* it is probable that this is meant to depict the giantess Hyrrokkin (cf. Jansson 1987: 152). Snorri relates the arrangements for Baldr’s funeral, and how the gods were unable to move

the ship that held his body. Hermóðr is sent on Sleipnir to fetch help:



Fig. 3.1 A possible ‘Rider’ figure on stone 3 from Hunnestad in Skåne, which in the Viking Age was part of Denmark (DR 284; after Jacobsen & Moltke 1941: 271).

Þá var sent í Jotunheima eptir gýgi þeiri er Hyrrokkin hét. En er hon kom ok reið vargi ok hafði hoggorm at taumum þá hljóp hon af hestinum, en Óðinn kallaði til berserki fjóra at gæta hestins, ok fengu þeir eigi

haldit nema þeir feldi hann.

So they sent to Jotunheimr for a giantess called Hyrrokkin. And when she arrived, riding a wolf and using vipers as reins, she dismounted from her steed, and Óðinn summoned four *berserkir* to look after the mount, and they were unable to hold it without knocking it down.

Gylfaginning 49; translation after Faulkes 1987: 49

In the context of the Hunnestad memorial stones, the association with a funeral is appropriate and also honourable as it compares Gunnarr's dead sons to no less a figure than Baldr himself.

Besides the 'riders' as nightmare-like shape-changers and witches on their supernatural steeds, there is also a third sense in which this concept was applied to Viking-Age sorceresses. This is connected to the idea that the being 'sent out' to ride its victim was an aspect of the sender's soul. We have seen this concept already in connection with Óðinn, but there are several terms that can link it to mortal sorceresses. Some of these are quite ambiguous and allude merely to something being sent out in a cold place, perhaps the night air – examples here include *kaldriða*, 'cold-rider' and *þráðriða*, 'thread-rider'. There is one term, however, that is more specific because it occurs in a spell designed to prevent such free-souls from returning to their bodies. This is the famous and difficult strophe 155 from *Hávamál*, the tenth in the so-called *Ljóðatal* (str. 146–63): which lists the charms known to Óðinn:

Þat kann ek it tíunda:	I know a tenth:
ef ek sé túnriður	if I see *túnriður*
leika lopti á,	moving [playing?] up in the air,
ek svá vinnk	I can so contrive it
at þær villar fara	that they go astray
sinna heimhama	from the home of their shapes
sinna heimhuga.	from the home of their minds.

Hávamál 155; my translation This piece is discussed extensively by Ólsen (1916) and Strömbäck (1935: 168ff) and we shall return to it several times below, but here we can focus on the term *túnriður* for those whom Óðinn sees up in the sky. Literally it would appear to mean 'fence-rider' or 'roof-rider', a sense which has a number of resonances with other sources. The closest of these are the law codes from Västergötland which prescribe penalties for claiming that 'I saw you ride on a *kvigrind* [farm-gate] with your hair let down

and in troll shape, when it was between day and night' (ÄVgL Rb V: 5; Solheim 1964: 553). If the term is connected to the other 'riders', then this would appear to confirm the idea that they are sending out some aspect of themselves which is separate from the *hamr* and *hugr*, to which Óðinn's spell would deny them a return. There is also an interesting amendment, made by Dronke and other editors, from the original text in the Codex Regius which uses the masculine form *þeir villir* in line 5. I am not competent to judge the merits of the amendment, but a grammatical ambiguity of gender may be deliberate and relevant in this context (I thank Richard Perkins for this observation).

Katherine Morris (1991: 171) sees the image of riding a fence as representing the border between two worlds, and thus stands for the sorceresses's ability to cross this boundary. She develops this idea with a number of binary oppositions familiar from archaeological analyses of the post-processual 90s, such as cultivated and uncultivated, wilderness and civilisation, natural and supernatural (*ibid*). This is an attractive idea and certainly fitting, but seems to rely too much on modern theories of symbolism rather than the mental schemes of the Viking Age. It must remain an interesting possibility.



Fig. 3.2 Worm's woodcut of the Hunnestad monument as it was in the 1600s. Five of the eight stones are now lost (after Jacobsen & Moltke 1941: 267).

Strömbäck (1935: 167–92) has collected most of the examples of these 'riders', and they form a discrete and dangerous class among the female practitioners of Nordic sorcery. As with the other forms, it is clear that a woman could be a 'rider' while also being spoken of as a different kind of sorceress (as in *Eyrbyggja saga*). Significantly in view of its exclusive association with violence and harm, the fact of being a 'rider' seems to have always been kept secret. The consequences of disclosure could be severe, as we see again from *Eyrbyggja saga*, when the sorceress Katla is actually executed when she confesses to having been the one who 'rode' Gunnlaugr.

Men and magic

As we have seen in Snorri, the practice of sorcery by men was socially problematic in the Viking period. Nevertheless, there are a great many

descriptions of men who chose to perform these rituals. The sexual and gender aspects of this are discussed separately below, but here we can consider the individuals themselves, who like their female counterparts clearly belonged to a number of different categories. It is clear from almost all accounts of the male sorcerers that their magical activities were well-known in the community – indeed, some of then even acquired their nicknames in this way, such as Galdra-Heðinn in *Njáls saga* (101).

The most common of the *seiðr*-terms was *seiðmaðr*, '*seiðr*-man', for which the ONP has 12 citations from the prose sources. The word *maðr* can refer to both sexes, but I have found only one source (*Laxdæla saga*) in which this is the case with the sorcerer terms.

In many ways they seem to have functioned in a similar fashion to the sorceresses, almost as a 'professional' class. Like the *volur*, *seiðmenn* could be paid for their services, as is the case with Þorgrímr in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (18), who receives a nine-year-old ox for performing a ritual that attracted a particularly large charge of *ergi* (see below). In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (25), a *seiðmaðr* is also hired to change a man's appearance.

Despite the connotations of perversity attaching to male *seiðr* performance, again like the sorceresses such men could come from the highest strata of society. The most famous example is that of Rognvaldr réttilbeini, one of the sons of Haraldr hárfagra by the Sámi sorceress Snæfríðr (see chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of their relationship). We are told that Rognvaldr was given dominion over Haðaland by his father, where he learned magic and became a *seiðmaðr* (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 35). According to the saga he attracted a following of like-minded male sorcerers, and a Viking-Age reality may have lain behind this as suggested by a *lausavísa* from *c*.900 by a *seiðmaðr* called Vitgeirr (see Strömbäck 1935: 43f for a discussion of his name). Told by the king, who hated such men, to stop his practices immediately, Vitgeirr replied with a verse:

Þat's vo lítil,	Little wonder
at vér síðim	that we perform *seiðr*,
karla born	sons of farmers
ok kerlinga,	and farmers' wives
es Rognvaldr síðr	for so does Rognvaldr

réttilbeini,	réttilbeini,
hróðmogr Haralds,	high-praised son of Haraldr,
á Haðalandi.	in Haðaland.

Vitgeirr seiðmaðr, *lausavísa*; my translation So angered is Haraldr by this, that he sends his son Eiríkr Blóðøx – later to be king of York – to Haðaland, where *hann brendi inni Rognvald bróður sinn með lxxx seiðmanna, ok var þat verk lofat mjok*, ‘he burned his brother Rognvaldr in his hall together with 80 *seiðmenn*, and for this deed he was much praised’.

The pattern is continued by Rognvaldr’s grandson, Eyvindr Kelda, who also was a *seiðmaðr* of great skill (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 62). With similar feelings to his predecessor, the new king Óláfr also tries to kill the sorcerer by burning him at home, but Eyvindr escapes and vows revenge. Again, he also seems to have gathered a retinue of sorcerers, but here they also function as his personal bodyguard in battle. When the king is staying on an island with a following of 300 men, Eyvindr tries a surprise attack in a longship, *váru þat alt seiðmenn ok annat fjolkyngisfólk*, ‘crewed entirely by *seiðmenn* and other types of sorcerers’ (*ibid*: 63). Summoning a magical darkness to confuse the king’s men, Eyvindr and his troops are surprised themselves when the spell is turned back upon them. They are captured and drowned in the outer skerries, a typical location away from normal traffic (cf. Ström 1942 for further capital sanctions against sorcerers of both sexes).

A contrasting picture is found in *Ynglingasaga* (22), when King Hugleikr is recorded as having in his retinue *seiðmenn ok allz konar fjolkunnigt fólk*, ‘*seiðmenn* and all manner of sorcerers’. The same is true in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (39), when an envoy of Óláfr Tryggvason employs two *seiðmenn* to accompany him on a mission to retrieve objects from a royal grave; there is a suggestion that the sorcerers have been hired for protection.

Sometimes *seiðmenn* appear in entire families, which include female members. In the sagas such people are always presented negatively, and often serve a role as trouble-makers in a district, medieval neighbours-from-hell whose sorcerous malice provides pretexts for the acts of violence and revenge that drive the narrative. The most dramatic example is probably that of the married couple Kotkell and Gríma, and their sons Hallbjorn slíkisteinsauga (‘sleek-stone-eye’) and Stígandi, in *Laxdæla saga* (35ff). Coming to Iceland

from the Hebrides, we are told that *Oll váru þau mjok fjolkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn*, ‘they were all very skilled in sorcery and were great *seiðmenn*’. More of this family’s activities are discussed below.

There are also Anglo-Saxon parallels for these individuals, in relation to the practice of a form of sorcery called *ælfsiden*; this is discussed by Richard North (1997: 50–6, 317f).

A related term is *seiðskratti*, which carries the same connotations of obscenity as the *seiðmaðr* but seems also to refer to a specifically evil practitioner of sorcery. The ONP has 6 listings for this word, which appears with particular emphasis in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. In several of the later sagas the *seiðskratti* is associated with the power to convey invulnerability to damage (cf. Almqvist 2000: 255–8).

Another special term in this context is found in the list of sorcerous progenitors that we noted in *Hyndluljóð* 33. The last of the three classifications there is called *seiðberendr*, which is probably masculine but which could perhaps be applied to both sexes (Strömbäck 1935: 29). The fuller implications of this term, which probably had connotations of obscenity and unmanliness, are taken up below in the discussion of *seiðr* and deviancy, but here we can note that it certainly formed one of the specific categories of male *seiðr*-performers. Beyond its sexual aspects, the word means literally ‘*seiðr*-carrier’, but we have no way of knowing what this actually meant in terms of function and ritual specialism as it does not occur in any operative context. The progenitor of the *seiðberendi*, Svarthofði, is a name which also may also have had connotations of perversity, again reviewed below. As a brief coda to the *seiðberendi*, we can also note that the Old Norse prose sources contain a single reference to *fjolkyngiberandi*, ‘sorcery-carriers’, which may be somehow related (ONP word-list).

Another term for sorcerers is one that we have already encountered above in its presumed female version, for which the male equivalent is *vitki*. In terms of specific meaning we can only approximate to something general such as ‘sorcerer’, but it was clearly of some importance since it is one of the three terms mentioned in the genealogy of magical practitioners in *Hyndluljóð* 33, the other two being the *volur* and *seiðberendi*. According to the poem, *vitkar allir frá Vilmeiði*, ‘all the *vitkar* come from Vilmeiðr’. The origins of this name are obscure and we have no information on this person outside the strophe in

Hyndluljóð, but it seems to derive from a word for ‘tree’ or ‘beam’. Beyond this – which one might suggest refers to the World Tree, though this is of course entirely speculative – the nature of the *vitkar* is obscure.

A more intelligible group of terms refers to men who could perform acts of prophecy and divination, presumably in much the same way as the *volur*. Exactly as for the female equivalent, the term for these men was *spámaðr*, ‘prophecy-man’, which with 70 citations in the prose sources was clearly one of the most common types of male ritual specialist. We shall encounter several examples in the following chapters. Interestingly, there were also terms for men who either claimed to be *spámenn*, or whose divinations were misleading. These include *villuspámaðr* (5 citations in the ONP) and *falsspámaðr* (1 citation), both of which mean ‘false prophecy-man’, or ‘man who prophecies falsely’. We know nothing further of the activities of these men in Viking-Age Scandinavia, but as we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, among the Sámi and the circumpolar cultures we find exact equivalents for this concept.

Just as with the sorceresses, there are also a number of terms which seem to refer to male practitioners in terms of ‘knowing’. These include *kunáttumaðr*, a ‘man who knows magic’, and *vísendamaðr*, a ‘man who knows’. This latter term was particularly common, with 30 citations recorded in the prose sources (ONP word-list), but seems to have had a similarly vague meaning of ‘wise man’ as the female equivalent. The same applies to *fjolkyngismaðr*, ‘sorcerer’, of which one example is known. Two other terms – *taufræmaðr*, ‘charm-man’, and *gerningamaðr*, ‘sorcerer’ – are similarly obscure and are also very rare. We do not know if they were highly specific, or very generalised in meaning.

Another major group of male sorcerer-terms relates to the concept of *galdr* discussed above. This practice does not seem to have attracted the same degree of social opprobrium as *seiðr*, which may explain the relative frequency of these people in the sources. The most common was *galdramaðr*, ‘*galdr*-man’, with 33 citations in the ONP. Variations include *galdrameistari*, ‘*galdr*-master’ (6 citations); *galdrakarl*, ‘*galdr*-man’ (1 citation); *galdrasmiðr*, ‘*galdr*-smith’ (1 citation); and the poetic words *galdraraumr*, ‘great-*galdr*-man’, and *galdradrengr*, which may mean ‘*galdr*-attendant’. The range of terms strongly implies a kind of hierarchy within the *galdramenn*, perhaps even including assistants like the those of the *volur* (the enigmatic *galdradrengr*), but again

we know few details of these practices. That they were seen as a specific class of practitioners, with specific skills, is shown in a remarkable passage from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (1–2) in which a succession of sorcerers of different types are employed to attempt the same task. This episode, which includes *volur* and *vísendamenn*, depicts the *galdramenn* as the most powerful of all; it is quoted in full below, in the section on divination and revealing the hidden.

Lastly, there is one recorded example of the term *gandrekr*, '*gandr*-man' or even '*gandr*-warrior', but we have no information of what these individuals could do.

The assistants

A key element of the *seiðr* ritual in many of the Old Norse sources was the presence of an additional group of people who would in some way assist the central performer.

In *Eiríks saga rauða*, it is a group of women who form a circle around the *volva* Þorbiorg on her platform, though it is not specified whether they were already present at the farm or had come there with the seeress. The former is implied, as one would expect a *volva*'s following to know the chants required to summon the spirits, and which are clearly lacking on this occasion.

There are other accounts which state explicitly that *volur* travelled with a number of retainers. In the early fourteenth-century *Orvar-Odds saga* (2), for example, the *volva* Heiðr arrives at a farm with a following (*raddlið*) of 15 girls and 15 boys. Unlike the other saga accounts of a divination commissioned from a peripatetic *volva*, here the actual ceremony is conducted in private and at night while the household sleeps. The only mention of the function of Heiðr's following is that they participate in the 'night-rituals' with her, and that this involved *kveðandi mikil*, 'great chanting'. Similarly, in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* (in *Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* 414), a *volva* travels with her *sveit*, 'retinue', again moving from farm to farm to give prophecies. Something similar, though this time with more than one *volva* and a *sveit manna*, 'a following of people', is found in *Norna-gests þáttr*. Once more their function is not given.

Male *seiðr* performers may also have had such entourages, as Strömbäck speculates (1935: 118), but here he interprets descriptions of many *seiðmenn* acting together as representing one primary performer and his followers, which

is not necessarily the case. Equally, there are saga descriptions of *volur* who apparently had no assistants of any kind.

For both male and female *seiðr*-workers, there seem to have been a number • ○ ○ ○of permutations: One performer alone with accompanying assistants • ○with assistants drawn from the host household Two or more performers ○without assistants with accompanying assistants As to the assistants' purpose, it is certain that they in some way participated in the *seiðr* rituals, probably in a circle around the main performer, and their function was in some way connected with the *varðlok(k)ur* songs and other chants discussed below. Anything more than this is speculation alone.

The concept of a 'choir' as part of a spirit-sending or summoning ritual is found in many of the circumpolar societies, not least that of the Sámi, and we shall consider this further in chapters 4 and 5.

Towards a terminology of Nordic sorcerers

Some scholars have argued that it is not possible, or worthwhile, to attempt to compile a collective terminology of Norse sorcery. In her recent survey of the field, for example, Catharina Raudvere has suggested that,

> … there is no need to establish a taxonomic structure that does not exist in the sources. Precise classifications are impossible to formulate since the texts give contradictory statements – not because the Norsemen had confused opinions, but because the concepts of *trolldómr* and related ideas were used for explanations in so many very different areas of life.
>
> Raudvere 2001: 80

This is correct to the extent that this plurality of contextual meanings was certainly a part of the *seiðr* complex, but this should not be used to argue that we cannot distinguish between different types of practice and practitioner. The analysis in the preceding pages has attempted to demonstrate this, and while each of these people and the rituals they performed are different, they also fall into patterns – some broad, some more clearly defined.

Gathering together the categories discussed above, I would argue that in fact we can begin to arrive at a basic terminology for the performers of Nordic sorcery in the Viking Age. The chronology and contemporaneity of the terms is problematic, of course, but this serves as an outline on which to build. In particular, we can compare it with a similar array of terms among the Sámi that we shall examine in the next chapter.

The generic term ‘sorcerer’ has been used in the translations for any word that clearly refers to someone who works magic, but without any more precise association. Obviously the different ‘sorcerer’ words had their own meanings, now lost to us, but we should also remember that they may also have been generics in the medieval period. It must be emphasised that in the later texts terms are often employed with an arbitrary meaning, as with ‘wizard’, ‘sorcerer’, ‘magician’ and similar words today. This is especially true of terms based on *galdr-* and *spá-*.

The word *maðr* can grammatically refer to individuals of both sexes, but as noted above the only instance of its use for a magic-using woman is

when Kotkell's family of three male sorcerers and one sorceress are collectively described as *seiðmenn*. This is therefore included here among the male terms.

Male (including *-maðr* formations):
- *seiðmaðr* '*seiðr*-man'
- *seiðskratti* 'evil-*seiðr*-sorcerer'?
- *seiðberendr* '*seiðr*-carrier'? (obscene?)
- *spámaðr* 'prophecy-man'
- *falsspámaðr* 'false prophecy-man'
- *villuspámaðr* 'false prophecy-man'

- *galdramaðr* '*galdr*-man'
- *galdrakarl* '*galdr*-man'
- *galdrasmiðr* '*galdr*-smith'
- *galdraraumr* 'great-*galdr*-man'
- *galdrameistari* '*galdr*-master'
- *galdradrengr* '*galdr*-attendant'?

- *vitki* sorcerer
- *fjolkyngismaðr* sorcerer
- *fjolkyngisberendr* 'sorcery-bearer'
- *gandrekr* '*gandr*-man', '*gandr*-warrior'
- *kunáttumaðr* 'man who knows magic'
- *vísendamaðr* 'man who knows'
- *taufræmaðr* 'charm-man'
- *gerningamaðr* sorcerer

Female:
- *volva* 'staff-bearer', seeress, sibyl?
- *seiðkona* '*seiðr*-woman'
- *spákona* 'prophecy-woman'
- *spákerling* 'old prophecy-woman'

- *kveldriða* ‘evening-rider’
- *trollriða* ‘rider of witchcraft’
- *myrkriða* ‘darkness-rider’ or ‘night-rider’
- *munnriða* ‘mouth-rider’
- *túnriða* ‘fence-rider’ or ‘roof-rider’
- *kaldriða* ‘cold-rider’ • *þráðriða* ‘thread-rider’
- *galdrakona* ‘*galdr*-woman’
- *galdrakerling* ‘old-*galdr*-woman’
- *galdrasnót* ‘*galdr*-lady’
- *galdrakind* ‘*galdr*-creature’? (i.e. sorceress, negative?)

- *vitka** sorceress
- *fjolkyngiskona* sorceress
- *vísendakona* ‘wise woman’, ‘woman who knows’
- *heiðr* sorceress (positive?)

- *fordæða* evil witch?
- *flagð(kona)* evil witch?
- *fála* witch? (negative)
- *gýgr* witch? (negative)
- *hála* witch? (negative)
- *skass* witch? (negative)

We have examined these people in the written sources, their possible affiliations and relative context, but what evidence do we have for them from the funerary material?

The performers in death?

The archaeological material that directly relates to *seiðr* and its performers can be divided into two broad categories:

- individual objects that may be interpreted either as tools for the working of sorcery or as otherwise connected with its practice
- the graves of possible sorcerers

The latter category can be defined as such due to the presence of the former, and by evidence of unusual mortuary behaviour, but the material culture of Nordic sorcery is also found in archaeological contexts unassociated with graves. Each type of object will be considered separately in the next section on the practicalities of *seiðr* performances, but we can first examine the burials as complete assemblages.

Very many burials from Viking-Age Scandinavia contain objects associated with spiritual belief in some way, most typically 'amulets' of various kinds such as Þórr's hammers, miniature sickles and so on. There is little to suggest that these artefacts were directly associated with magic, though some of them may have symbolised aspects of its practice (two categories of these, miniature chairs and model staffs, are considered below). In interpreting a grave as that of a 'sorcerer', we must therefore seek to locate objects that were actually employed in performance. Of these, the two most characteristic are probably staffs and narcotics.

In total there are 26 Viking-Age burials known from Norway, Sweden and Denmark which contain iron staffs of a kind that may arguably be related to the practice of sorcery, following the specific interpretations set out later in this chapter. 12 staffs are known from stray finds across the same region, and one more has been excavated from a cultic deposition. Outside Scandinavia proper, but within the Viking world and the Norse sphere of influence and colonisation, another 8 iron staffs have been recovered from burials. In addition to these 47 iron staffs from various contexts, 4 wooden staffs are also known from Scandinavia – 3 from burials and one ritually deposited in a bog – making a total of some 51 staffs of all kinds known from the Viking world.

The staff graves present a number of empirical problems. Firstly, as we shall see below the total corpus of staffs includes different types, some of which are more secure than others in their association with *seiðr*; they range from clear examples to others which are simply iron rods, but buried in contexts that imply a function beyond the ordinary. Secondly, many of the burials in which these objects are found are either poorly preserved, badly recorded, or else in cremation deposits that provide little information as to the deceased. If we are to attempt an 'archaeology of sorcerers', rather than

merely their equipment, we therefore need to find burials which combine appropriate artefactual assemblages with acceptable levels of preservation.

Following these criteria, we find that there are ten Scandinavian Viking-Age graves which can be reasonably claimed to be those of *volur* or similar practitioners of sorcery, and which are also relatively intact and well-recorded. These include seven inhumations and three cremations. To these we may add an inhumation from the Isle of Man which also fulfils these criteria.

We can begin with four graves from the cemeteries around the Viking-Age town of Birka, in Lake Mälaren (Fig. 3.3), three of which have also been reviewed in dramatic form by Anna Lihammer (2012: 197–204) in her study of ruler figures.

Birka cremation grave Bj. 760, Björkö, Uppland, Sweden

Bj. 760 is a small cremation under a mound in the southwestern corner of the Hemlanden cemetery, immediately east of the rampart. It is largely unremarkable, with finds consisting solely of two beads, fragments of iron nails presumably from some wooden object, and a small ceramic vessel which probably served to contain the cremated bones (Gardeła 2016: 329); what sets it apart is the presence of one of the best-preserved iron staffs from any Viking-Age funerary context. Unlike the other objects, the staff has no details of its location in the grave, which seems unusual given its spectacular nature and the stark contrast that it makes with the other grave goods. Significantly perhaps, the staff does not seem to have been burnt. Arbman speculates that it may have been laid in the fill of the mound above the level of the cremation deposit (1943: 278), which would suggest that the act of placing the staff played some other role in the burial ritual than in Bj. 834 and 845 (see below).

The first edition of this book followed Arbman's suggestion (1943: 278) that the iron staff labelled by Stolpe as coming from Bj. 760 in fact derived from Bj. 660, which seemed to be supported by the close match between the excavator's object description and the field drawings of the latter grave. Furthermore, alone among the finds from Bj. 660, the staff clearly shown on the excavation plans could not be found when Arbman was preparing the publication of the graves; this seemed to me good evidence that the staff

labelled as deriving from Bj. 760 was actually the ‘missing’ artefact from Bj. 660. This re-allocation of the find had also been supported by Kyhlberg (1980b: 274) and Arwidsson (1986: 165). However, this situation changed in the years following the publication of my book, in the course of Leszek Gardeła’s research for his 2012 PhD thesis. Bearing in mind that the extant find *was* unambiguously labelled as coming from Bj. 760, with the assistance of Swedish History Museum curator Gunnar Andersson, Gardeła decided to try to locate the documented Bj. 660 staff in the finds magazines in Stockholm – and succeeded (Gardeła 2016: 57ff). Contrary to the position taken in the first edition, there is now no doubt that *both* Bj. 660 and Bj. 760 contained staffs, bringing the total currently known from the island’s cemeteries to four (together with Bj. 834 and Bj. 845 below).



Fig. 3.3 Plan of Viking Age Birka, showing the urban settlement and the surrounding cemeteries. The location of the four possible 'sorceress graves' is shown: 1. Bj. 660, 2. Bj. 760, 3. Bj. 834, 4. Bj. 845 (map prepared by Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson).

Little more can be said about Bj. 760 given the meagre nature of the records, but it is an important addition to the Birka corpus, and also demonstrates that such objects were not only buried with high-status chamber inhumations. In this, as we shall see below, the Birka graves now collectively look less distinctive from the other forms of staff burials than they first appeared.

Birka chamber-grave Bj. 660, Björkö, Uppland, Sweden

Bj. 660 is a large chamber grave containing a probable female inhumation, which Arbman places at an unknown location within the cemetery north of the hillfort (1943: 231ff). Working from Stolpe's excavation diaries, Ola Kyhlberg has achieved a more precise location, and suggests that all the graves in the sequence Bj. 656–660 can be placed within a small area on the northern periphery of cemetery 2A, at the very edge of the town and at the foot of the slope up towards the hillfort (pers. comm.; see Fig. 3.3).

Oriented northwest–southeast and measuring 2.45×1.5m, the grave-cut was 1.8 m deep. The chamber does not seem to have had wooden walls, though in each corner the excavators found what appeared to be a single filled-in post-hole. These perhaps related to the construction of the grave, but they may equally be the remains of some ritual about which we know nothing. Stolpe does not record in his notebooks whether or not he emptied the 'post-holes'.

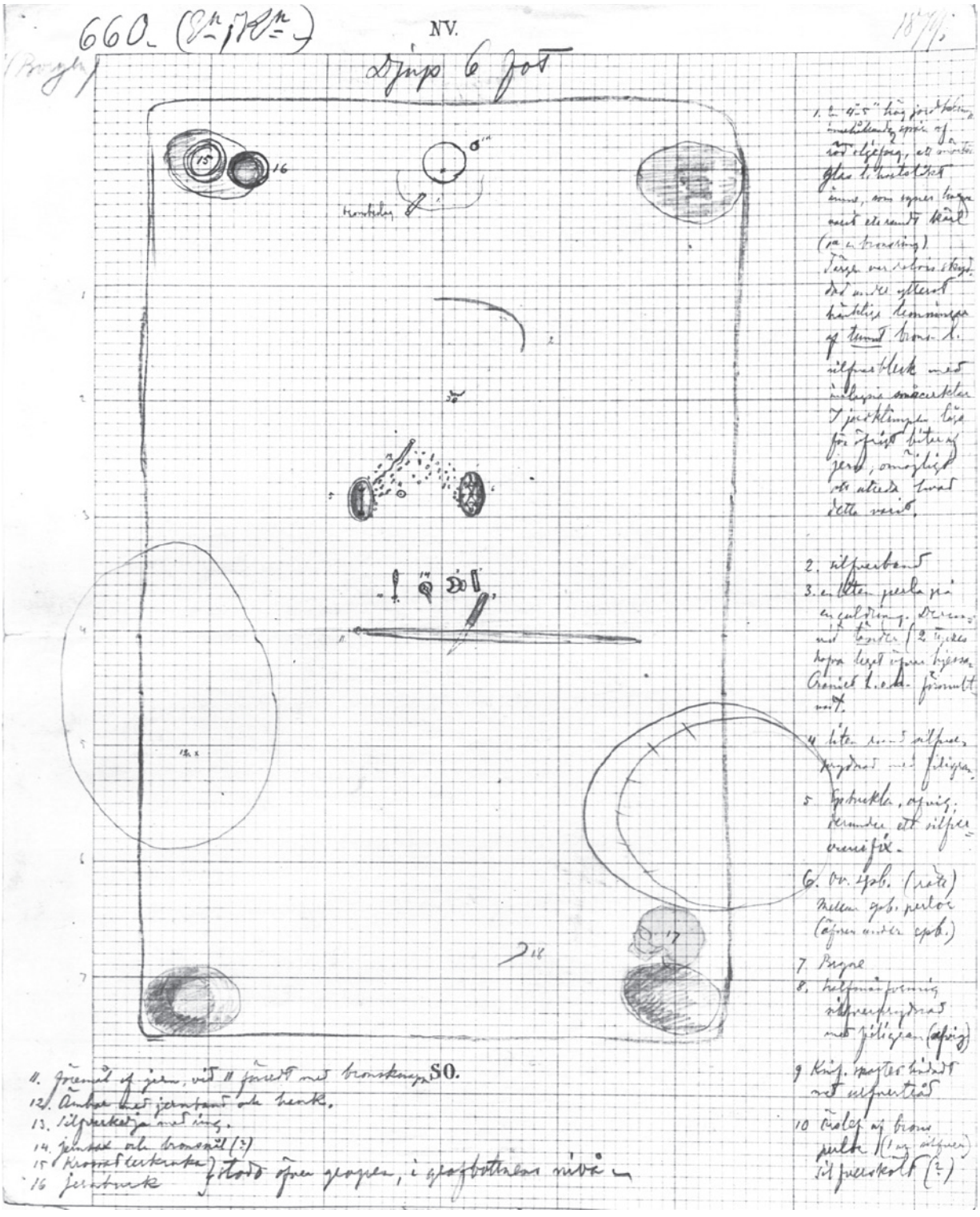


Fig. 3.4 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 660 (field drawing by Hjalmar Stolpe, ATA Stockholm, in the public domain).

In my discussion of the chamber below, reference is made to the numbered finds on the plan of the grave, and to the reconstruction drawing commissioned for this book (Figs 3.4–3.6). The objects numbered 20 and 21 on the plan are later intrusions into the fill, and are unrelated to the original grave. The large dotted shapes at the sides of the burial are boulders which originally lay outside the edges of the grave, but which subsided into it at a later date as the earth settled. Again, they are unrelated to the burial itself.

Of the skeleton only the teeth remained (1), and all sex determinations in this burial are thus made through artefactual associations alone. For the rest of this book, the occupants of this and other similar graves will be referred to with female pronouns, but see chapter 8 below for the considerable uncertainities surrounding such vocabularies and the attitudes behind them; this ambiguity should be borne in mind throughout the discussion that follows.

From the positions of the grave-goods, the woman (if such this person was) seems to have been lying full-length on her back in the centre of the chamber. She was wearing a silver-threaded silk band (7) around her head, as in grave Bj. 845 below. The woman was otherwise dressed in ‘conventional’ Viking-Age female costume, with at least one garment (a silk shawl?) edged with a narrow band of silver work as in grave Bj. 834. She was wearing a pair of oval brooches of type P51 C2, worn in the usual way (2), with a thin silver chain (4) perhaps strung on the right-hand of the two. A necklace of 28 beads (5) was strung between the oval brooches, including examples of rock crystal, glass with gold and silverfoil, and polychromatic glass with patterns. At the centre of the strings of beads was a circular pendant with a whirling design (3).

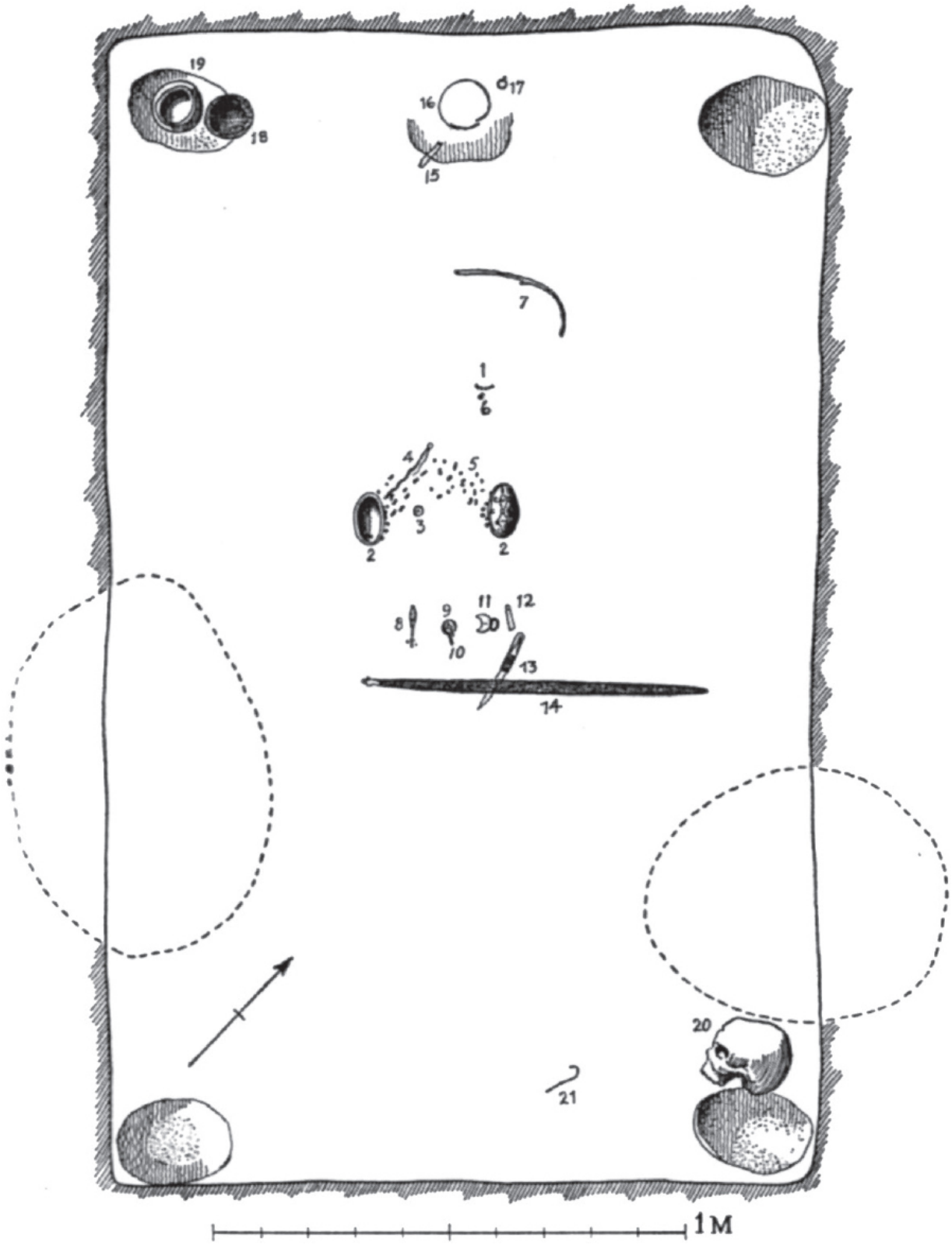


Fig. 3.5 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 660 (drawing by Harald Olsson after Arbman 1943: 232).

Under the oval brooch on her right breast was one of the most famous of all the Birka grave finds, namely the silver granulated crucifix which appears in every discussion of the material culture of early Scandinavian Christianity. It had presumably been strung with the beads, or perhaps attached to the silver chain.

As the body had decayed, or possibly while the woman was placed in the grave, the arrangement of jewellery had been disturbed. All the bead necklaces had slid towards the woman's head, and the right-hand oval brooch had fallen to the side. None of this is remarkable, except for the difficulty it makes for interpreting another piece of jewellery – a clear glass bead strung on a ring of gold wire (6), which was found by the woman's teeth. It is possible that it had rolled there from the main set of necklaces, but it is hard to see why this object alone should have moved in this way. All the usual forms of taphonomic process would surely have disturbed other beads from such a fragile context. Another possibility is that this bead represented a form of facial jewellery, a piercing of some kind, most likely either in the lip or the nose. In the reconstruction drawing we have chosen to depict the latter. An outside possibility is that it had for some reason been placed in the woman's mouth.



Fig. 3.6 Reconstruction of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 660 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

Attached to her belt she wore a number of small objects. From her right to left, these included a bronze ear-spoon (8) with a silver bead strung on it, a pair of iron scissors (9), an iron awl with a perforated handle (10), a curved pendant of Eastern origin (11), a whetstone of banded slate (12) and an iron knife (13).

Lying at right angles across the woman's body just below the waist, with the 'handle' end to the southwest (perhaps in the woman's hand?) was an iron staff (14). In a brief note, Stolpe described it as, "an iron object… with a bronze knob at one end".

At the centre top of the grave, above the woman's head, was a wooden box with iron mounts (15 & 17). Resting on this was a conical glass beaker of Continental type (16). In the western corner of the grave, resting on the filled-in hole, was a small ceramic vessel (19), next to which was a small iron-clad vessel (18). This perhaps supports the idea that the holes were more than constructional features. At the lower centre of the south-western long wall, up against the side of the chamber and under the stone shown as a dotted line, was a large wooden bucket (not shown on the plan – see the reconstruction).

The woman in Bj. 660 was buried with rich grave-goods, including imports such as the glass, and she was clearly a person of some standing in the community. The placement of the staff also emphasises its importance to the woman, laid as if for immediate use. In addition, the presence of the silver crucifix may also be interpreted in the context of a reference to the supernatural. In this context, the presence of the cross would make sense simply as an object of spiritual power, and the fact of its symbolism in a different faith would not contradict its use in a non-Christian ritual context – indeed, this might have been the very point (Andersson 2018: 110– 15). An interesting parallel has been discovered in Denmark from a female grave at Ketting in Als, southern Jylland, where an almost identical crucifix occurs in a wagon burial bearing remarkable similarities with grave 4 from

Fyrkat, discussed below (Eisenschmidt 2013); a gold example, again identical to that from Bj.660 apart from the use of more precious metal, has also been found at Aunslev in Denmark (Beck 2016). It has been siuggested that both the Als and Aunslev examples are so close in detail to the crucifix from Bj.660 that they were certainly made in the same workshop, and probably by the same person (*ibid*: 16) – an interesting extra dimension to the life of the woman in the Birka grave.

With a degree of caution, grave Bj. 660 was assigned to the very end of the ninth century by Arwidsson (1986: 166), which with a margin extending into the early 900s is also supported by Kyhlberg's chronology for the cemetery on the basis of clustered coin datings (1980a: 82; 1980b: 274). However, a more precise – and slightly later – date can probably be achieved with reference to the oval brooches. In his comprehensive study of these objects, Ingmar Jansson notes that brooches of this type occur in the very richest graves (1985: 133), and suggests that they are most common in phase three of his Middle Viking Period (*ibid*: 174f; 1991: 268f). This period begins sometime in the early tenth century, which provides our most secure date for grave Bj. 660.

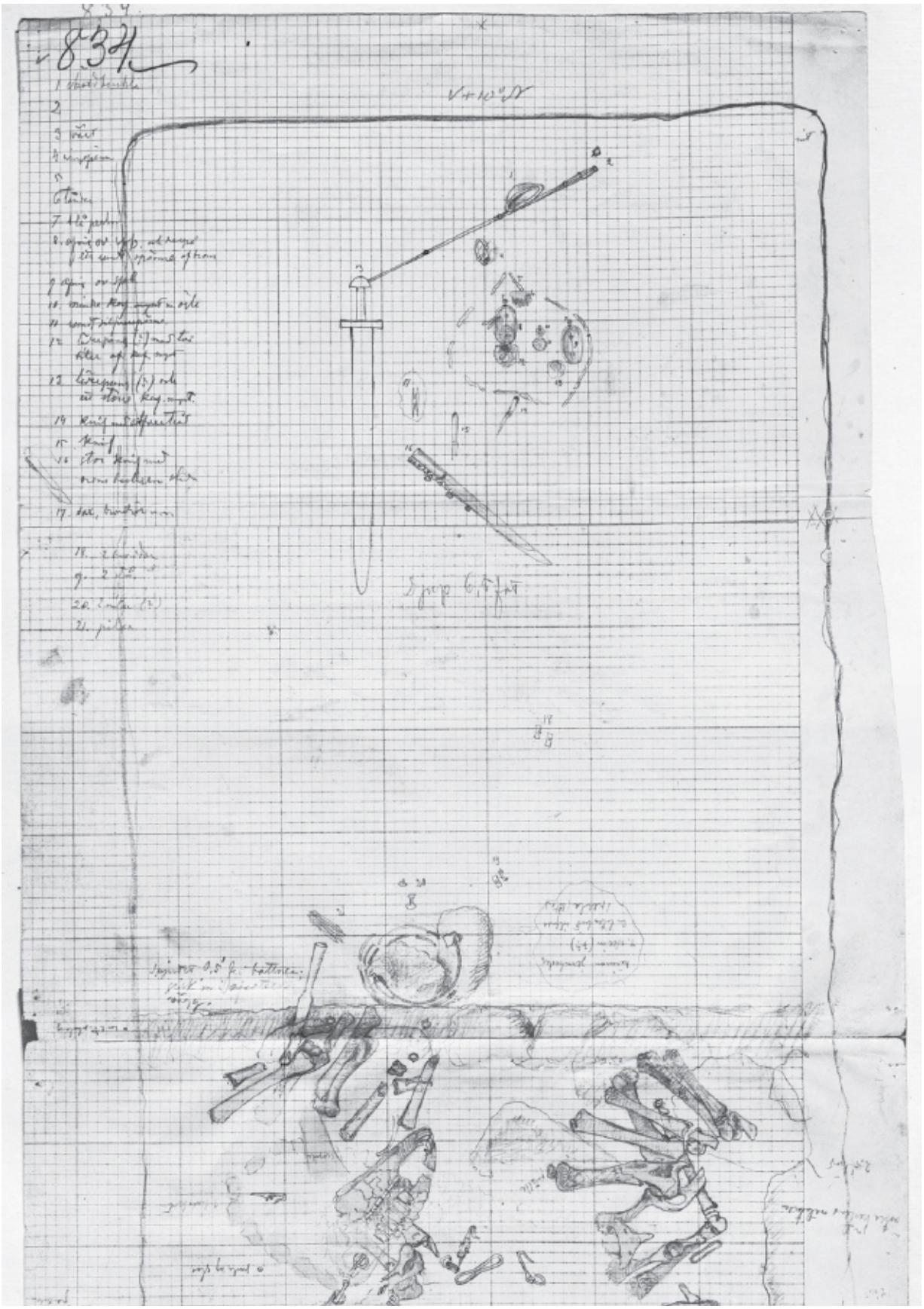
Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834, Björkö, Uppland, Sweden

Burial Bj. 834 at Birka was a double inhumation located in sector 1C of the Hemlanden cemetery. Here a man and woman had been interred together in a chamber grave, aligned east–west and located beneath – and thus predating – the town rampart (Arbman 1940: 304–8).

As above, reference is made to the numbered finds on the plan of the grave (Figs 3.7, 3.8), and to the reconstruction drawing. My observations about the disposition of the burial in Bj. 834 are based on an examination of Stolpe's original field drawings, in the form of the photographic enlargements made in the late 1970s for Uppsala University when the Birka cemetery publications were being prepared. These primary records show more detail than the plans redrawn for Arbman's report from 1940–41, which in some cases also include errors in the copying. All of Stolpe's field records for his Birka cemetery excavations are now also available online at the *Birkaportalen* of the Swedish History Museum (http://historiska.se/birka/).

The chamber was very substantial, 4 m long by 2 m wide, and 1.95 m deep – almost an underground room. The floor was bare earth but the walls were lined with horizontally-laid timber planks up to almost the lip of the grave cut. There were no corner posts, as the planks of the long walls simply butted against the end walls and held them in place. The grave was divided into two sections, a main burial chamber 2.6 × 2 m, and a raised platform at the east end, 1.4 m deep and 0.3 m high. The platform was built up of large, flat stones held in place by the wooden walls of the grave and a revetment of horizontal planks along its western edge, facing the main burial chamber.

Lying on the platform were two draught horses, their legs folded and their heads to the south. After they had been killed, the horses had been carefully arranged in the grave with their necks curled round so that the heads rested on the forelegs. It is possible that the animals had been decapitated, which would account for the strange position of their heads, but there is no direct indication of this on the plan or the bones. The horse to the west was 7–8 years old, while the horse to the east was 4–4½ years. The horses were buried wearing costly bridles and draught harness of good quality, with ornamental rings, tackle and strap-distributors, decorated with mounts. The western horse was shod with four crampons (25, 26), implying a winter burial, and seems to have had a single glass bead hanging from its bridle (28). Lying over the horses was a whip mounted with rattles (36).



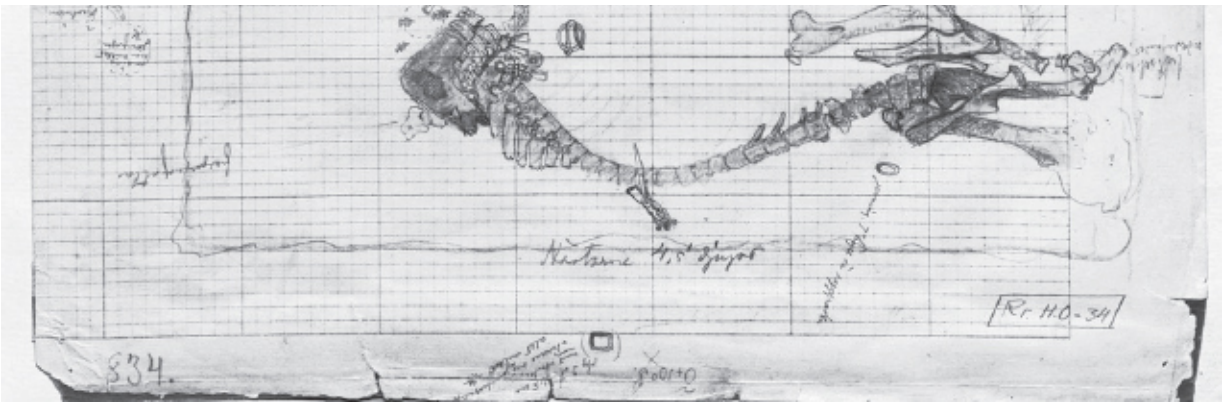
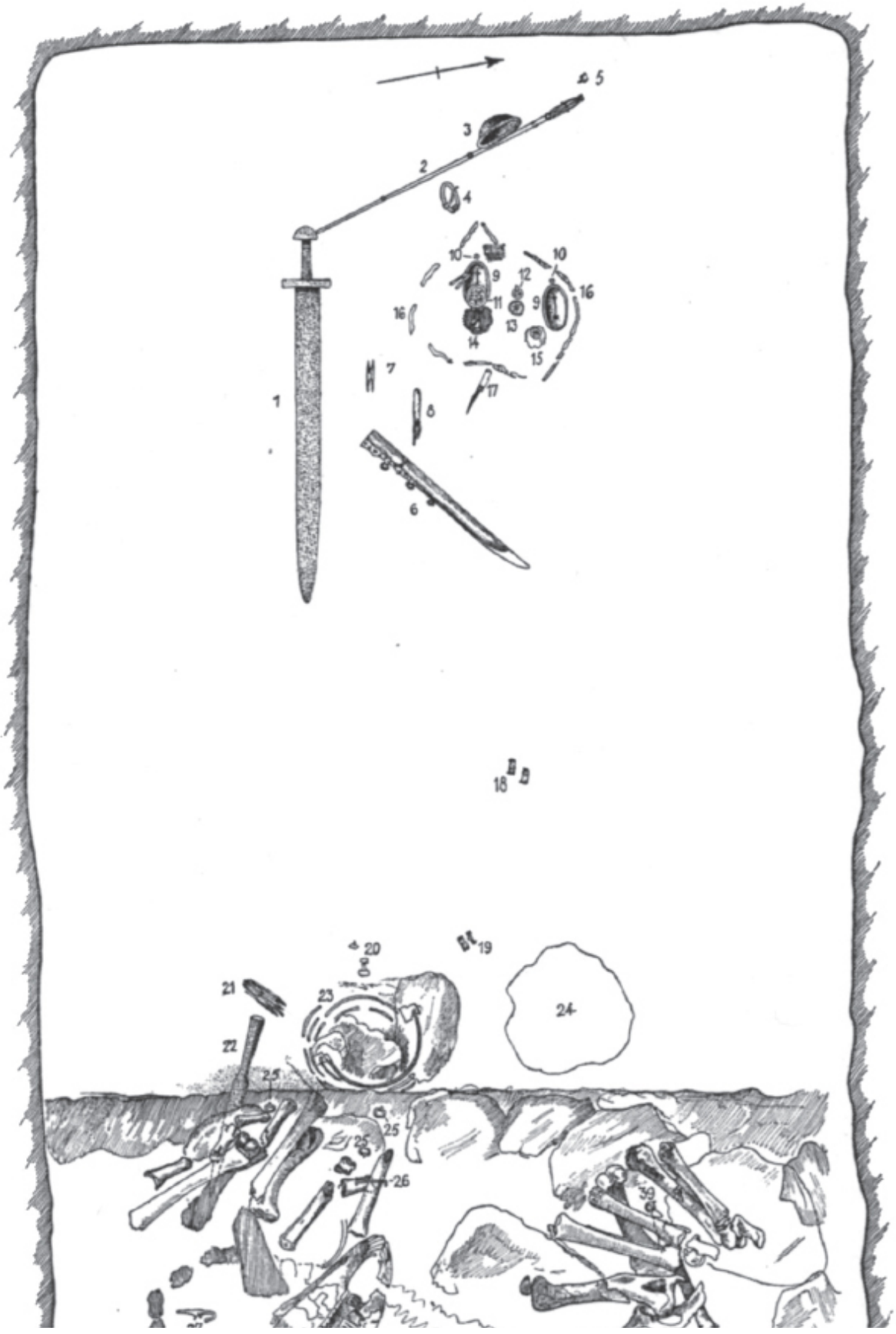


Fig. 3.7 Plan of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 (field drawing by Hjalmar Stolpe, ATA Stockholm, in the public domain).

The arrangement of the main grave was highly complex, and requires some discussion before moving on to the grave-goods. The primary problem in understanding how the bodies were placed in the grave is that the skeletons have not survived beyond a single set of teeth. The two sets of shoes, double sets of jewellery and other conventionally ‘sexed’ objects, strongly suggest that there were two bodies in the grave, assumed to be a man and a woman (though with caveats as for Bj. 660 above). Double burials of this kind are not uncommon at Birka, and are known from skeletal remains which survive in other graves.


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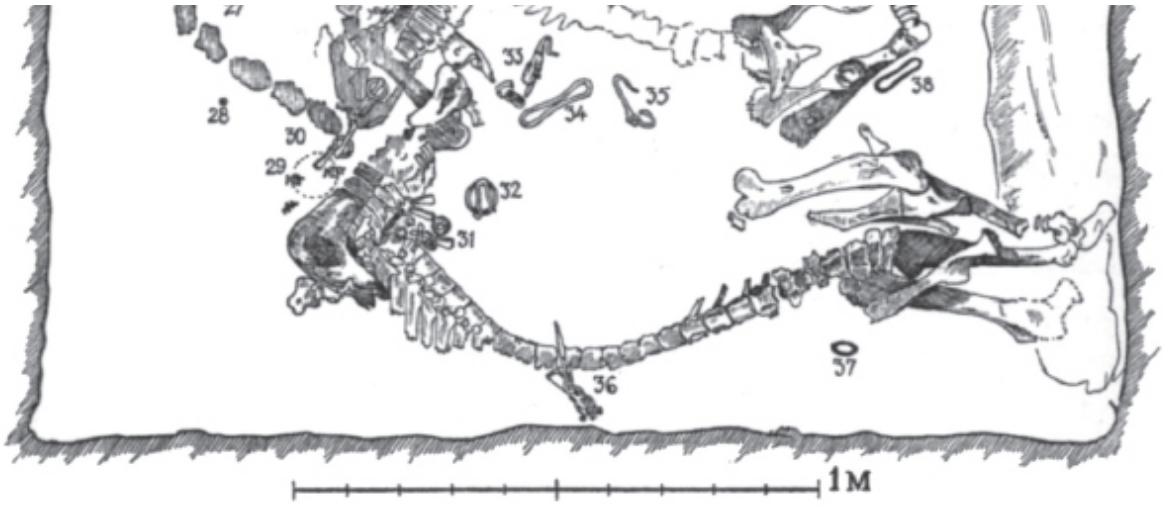


Fig. 3.8 Plan of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 (drawing by Harald Olsson after Arbman 1943: 306).

Kyhlberg argues that the woman's burial in Bj. 834 is secondary (1980b: 274), having been added to what was originally a chamber built for a man. However, in all the other Birka chamber-graves where secondary burials can be proven to have occurred soon enough after the first burial that soil had not accumulated between them, not only has the primary skeleton been pushed to one side (we cannot know this about Bj. 834 because the woman's teeth are the only surviving human bones) but so have the grave goods associated with it (Gräslund 1980: 36f; cf. Bj. 703 and 823). In Bj. 834 by contrast the man's equipment is still *in situ*. In short there is no reason to suppose that Bj. 834 was not a simultaneous double burial.

Our main parallel for the disposition of Bj. 834 comes from another Birka chamber grave, Bj. 644, in which enough bone fortunately survives to make a more detailed interpretation possible. This is especially important, because it seems that Bj. 644 contained the body of a man seated on a chair, with the body of a woman *placed on top of him in the same position* (*i.e.* two people in the same chair, their bodies 'stacked' in a conventional sitting posture, rather than the woman sitting cross-wise on the man's lap; Fig. 3.9). The evidence for this is three-fold:

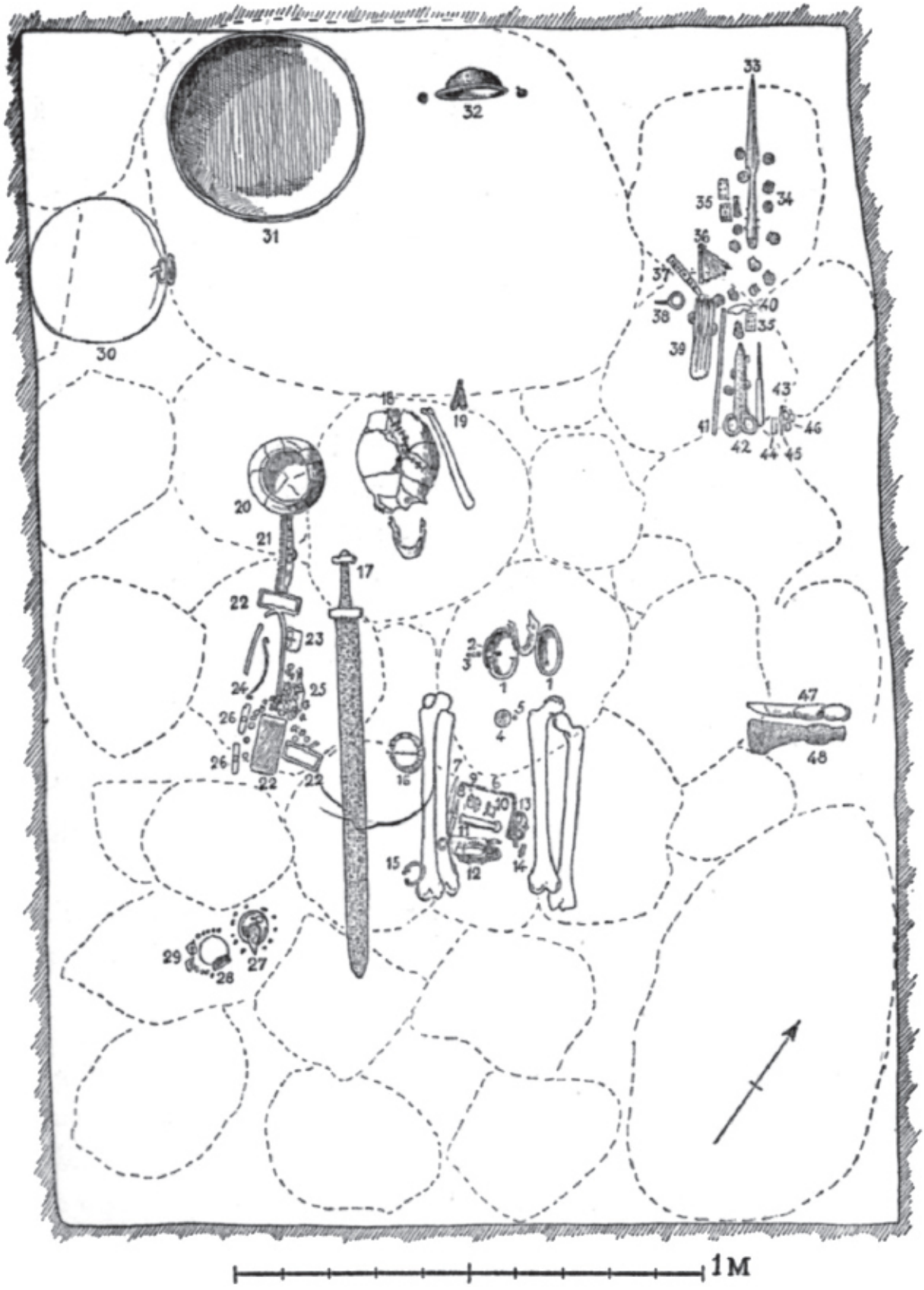

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Fig. 3.9 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 644, used to determine the original disposition of grave Bj. 834. Both burials seem to have contained a man seated in a chair, with a woman seated on top of him in his lap (after Arbman 1943: 222).

- both femurs of both bodies were preserved, and were lying exactly adjacent to one another – *i.e.* the legs of the dead were exactly parallel, and the bodies were on top of one another
- in itself this could mean that they were buried in an extended position one above the other, but the position of the man's skull rules this out: the only situation that could produce this relative location of the bones is that the dead were seated
- the woman's jewellery was found in appropriate positions to indicate that it was worn on the body, but the complete set of brooches was inverted, *i.e.* when found the woman was lying face-down; again, this would result if she had been uppermost in the chair and had fallen out of it to one side.

The bodies and the chair had all decayed, naturally, and the different rates at which this took place would explain the final positions in which the different parts of the corpses came to rest. In his annotations on the original excavation plan of this grave, Stolpe writes that the bodies in Bj. 644 must have been seated. He does not specify a *single* chair (the Swedish is ambiguous), but the superimposition of the thigh-bones could not come about if the dead had been seated separately. The idea of two bodies sitting on the same chair was put forward explicitly by Arbman (1943: 221), and supported by Gräslund (1980: 37). I find no reason to disagree, as this interpretation is really the only one that fits the combination of skeletal evidence and the positions of the grave-goods.

In Bj. 834 it is difficult to see how the bodies could have been placed if buried extended on their backs, as the grave-goods leave no room for them to have been laid out side by side. What evidence is there then to indicate that they may have been seated? Here we lack the bones that made such a specific interpretation possible in Bj. 644, but the relative positions of the

grave goods are the same – especially the sword and the woman's jewellery. A close examination of the field drawings clearly shows that the oval brooches are upside down, but still in the correct locations to be attached to the body's clothing when they fell into this position. In itself this could mean that the woman was buried prone, but here we can refer back to Bj. 644. Again, such a position for the body would be expected if the woman was in fact originally seated, and at some point in the decay process slumped over to one side and then finally out of the chair (Kyhlberg agrees with this, but as a secondary burial – 1980b: 275). I have discussed this with a former police officer, who confirmed that in cases where people have died sitting in a chair and their bodies have not been found for some time, the corpse is often discovered face-down on the floor in precisely this way.

The grave-goods provide an answer to the obvious question as to how two bodies would have stayed on the chair in the first place if placed in this way. On the plan we can note object 16 which was a thin chain of iron sections linked by loops, found spread out on the floor of the grave enclosing the woman's jewellery in a rough oval. This could have been used to hold the bodies on the chair, fastened under their arms, and then fallen with them as they (or the chair) decayed. By the time this happened the bodies would have been essentially skeletonised, but perhaps still held together by their clothing. All of this would fit with the positions of the objects in the grave. Thus in Bj. 834 it seems that in approximately the centre of the chamber stood a chair, facing east, on which was sitting a man with a woman on top of him (Figs 3.10, 3.11).



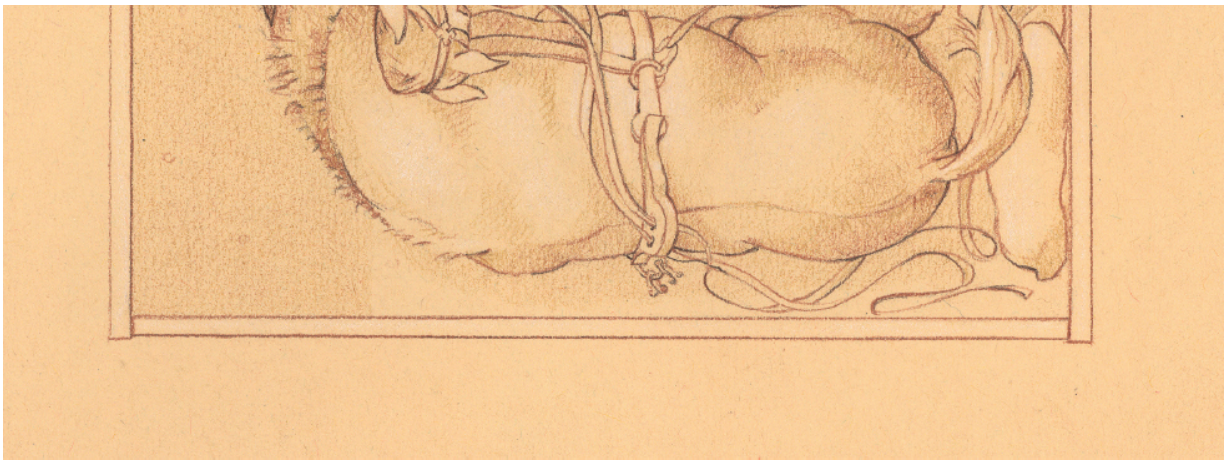


Fig. 3.10 Reconstruction of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed, seen from above (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

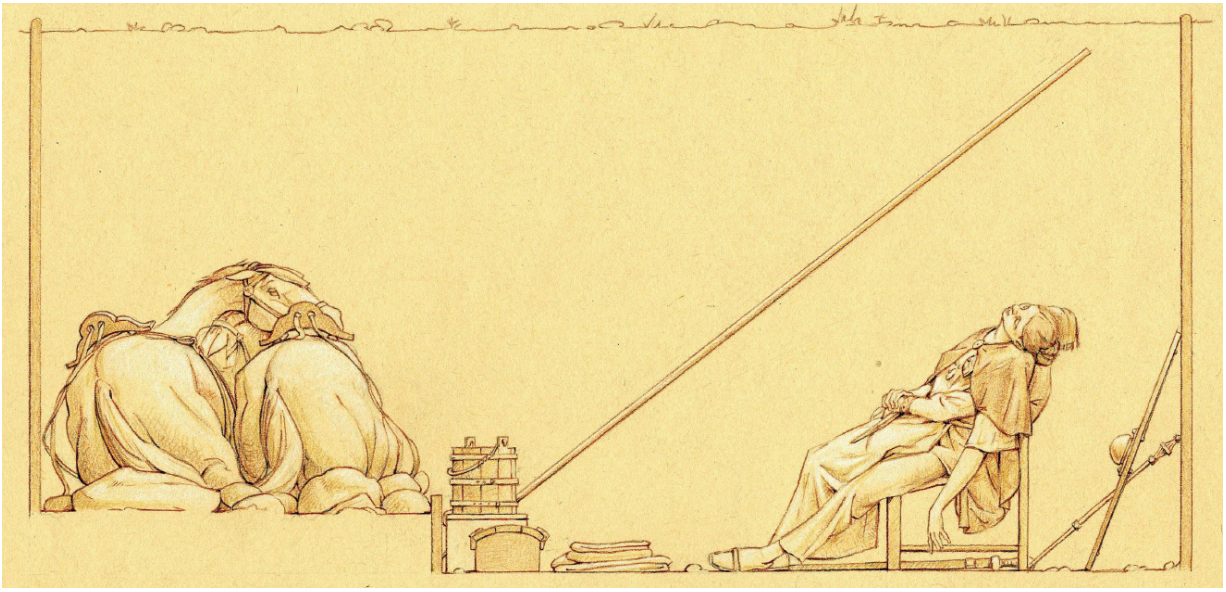


Fig. 3.11 Reconstruction of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed, seen from the side (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

The idea that the dead were sometimes seated in the chamber-graves is also found in several literary sources, and is supported by at least two sagas. The most vivid account, and the most archaeologically useful, comes from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 18. The anti-hero Grettir has decided to rob a

large burial mound on a headland, over which he has seen flames hovering at night (the idea of burial fires is found in other sources too, notably the un-named poem usually known in English as ‘The Waking of Angantyr’ and found in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*; here, as in *Grettis saga*, the fires are taken to denote the presence of treasure in the mound beneath). Grettir is told that the mound contains the remains of the former landowner of the region, who has since haunted the area so as to make it uninhabitable by any save his own descendants. Undeterred, and assisted by the local farmer Auðunn, he begins to break into the mound from the top. He works hard until he reaches the ‘rafters’ (*viðir*), which he then breaks through. Lowering a rope, he prepares to enter the barrow:

Gekk Grettir þá í hauginn; var þar myrkt ok þeygi þefgott. Leitask hann nú fyrir, hversu háttat var. Hann fann hestbein, ok síðan drap hann sér við stólbrúðir ok fann, at þar sat maðr á stóli. Þar var fé mikit í gulli ok silfri borit saman ok einn kistill settr undir fœtr honum, fullr af silfri. Grettir tók þetta fé allt ok bar til festar; ok er hann gekk útar eptir hauginum, var gripit til hans fast. Lét hann þá laust féit, en rézk í mót þeim, ok tókusk þeir þá til heldr óþyrmiliga. Gekk nú upp allt þat, er fyrir varð; sótti haugbúinn með kappi. Grettir fór undan lengi, ok þar kemr, at han sér, at eigi mun dugua at hlífask við. Sparir nú hvárrgi annan; fœrask þeir þangat, er hestbeinin váru; kippðusk þeir þar um lengi, ok fóru ýmsir á kné, en svá lauk, at haugbúinn fell á bak aptr, ok varð af því dykr mikill.

Then Grettir went into the mound. Inside it was dark, and the air not very sweet. He groped about to find out how things were arranged. He came upon some horse bones, then he knocked against the carved backpost of a chair, and he could feel someone sitting in it. A great treasure of gold and silver was gathered there, and under the man’s feet was a chest full of silver. Grettir took all the treasure and carried it towards the rope, but as he was making his way through the barrow he was seized fast by someone. He let go of the treasure and turned to attack, and they set on each other mercilessly, so that everything in their way was thrown out of place. The mound-dweller attacked vigorously, and for a while Grettir had to give way, but finally he realised that this was not a good time to spare himself. Then they both fought desperately, and moved towards the horse bones, where they had a fierce struggle for a long time. Now the one and now the other was forced to his knees, but in the end the mound-dweller fell backwards, and there was a great crash.

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar 18 Translation Fox and Hermann Pálsson 1974: 36–7.

The roof-construction of the chamber is exactly paralleled by Stolpe’s findings in the Birka cemeteries, such as the rafters found in grave Bj. 607 (Gräslund 1980: 35). The contents of the mound could almost be a description of the Birka chamber-graves, with the boxes of precious objects and the presence of horses, which the last part of the above passage clearly

indicates were slightly separate from the main chamber, again exactly as at Birka.

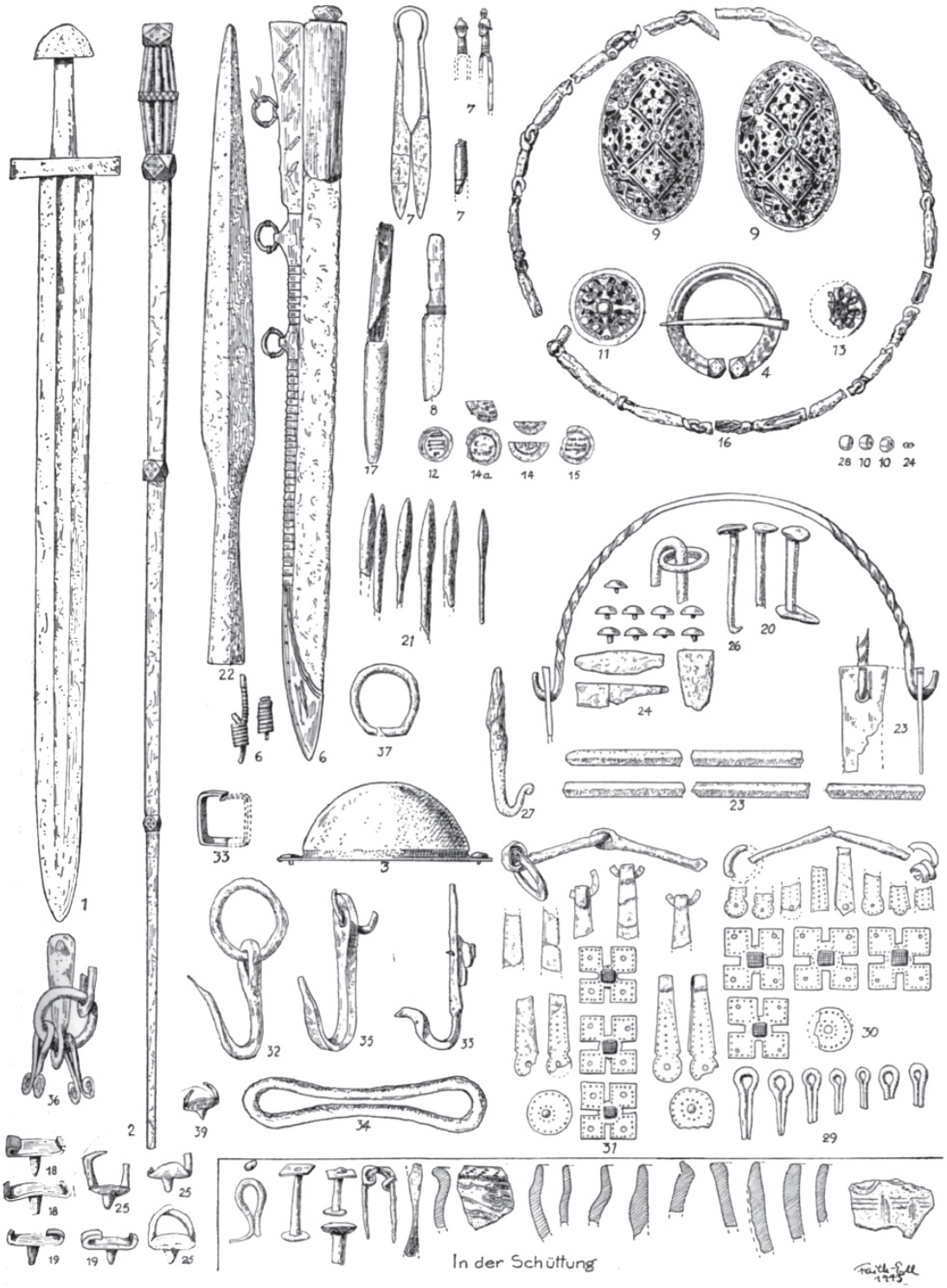


Fig. 3.12 Grave-goods from the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 (after Arbman 1943: 307; drawing by H. Faith-Ell).

Another account to mention a seated person in a mound comes from *Njáls saga* 78, when Gunnarr Hámundarson is described as sitting upright in the barrow constructed for him. In Gunnarr's case a chamber is clearly mentioned, as it is lit up by four 'lights' which enable the onlookers to see the dead man's exultant face as he happily sings in his mound (the mention of lights brings to mind the large wax candle found in the chamber grave at Mammen in Denmark, see Leth-Larsen 1991).

One further piece of supporting evidence, though not relating specifically to a chamber grave, is found in Ibn Fadlan's celebrated account of a Rus' funeral on the Volga, recorded during his diplomatic mission in 922. As noted in chapter 1, the famous ship burial description and other passages that may concern Scandinavians have been discussed many times and will not be reviewed in any detail here (excellent discussions appear in Wikander 1978, 1985; Foote & Wilson 1980: 407–11; Montgomery 2000; see also my own study of aspects of the text, Price 1998a: 39–42, 2010a, 2012). We can focus here on just one element of the burial rites: Ibn Fadlan makes it clear that the dead man is deposited in the funerary ship on a bier covered with tapestries, but that he is propped up with cushions to a sitting position.

Strangely, all these descriptions were largely ignored by archaeologists until Anne-Sofie Gräslund's analysis of the burial customs on Birka (1980: 37ff), prior to which the notion that the dead were seated in the chambers had been made only by the original excavator Hjalmar Stolpe (1882: 58–9; 1889: 461) and followed by Arbman as we have seen (1943: 221). Soon after finishing his main excavations on Birka, in the early 1880s Stolpe again encountered seated burials in some of the ships at Vendel, in particular the tenth-century grave IX which contained a man in a chair (Stolpe & Arne 1912: 37). Having reviewed the complete Birka funerary material, Gräslund was able to support Stolpe's suggestion that seated burial was actually *common* in the chamber-graves (1980: 37; see also Robbins 2004).

Returning to Bj. 834, we find an impressive array of grave-goods (Fig. 3.12). We know little of the man's clothes, except that he was wearing a cloak, fastened by a pennanular brooch (4). He had a belt on which were hung a sheathed knife (8), a long fighting knife (6), and a leather pouch containing Arabic coins (14). The latest of these was minted *c.*917–918.

The woman was wearing a belt from which hung an iron knife (17) and a leather pouch containing more Arabic coins (15) of which the latest provides a *terminus post quem* of *c.*913–932 for the construction of the grave (Arwidsson 1986: 166).

She seems to have worn the archaeologically normative Viking-Age female dress, with two oval brooches of type P42 (9), bronze and silver brooches (11, 13) and two faience beads strung between them (10). A ninth-century Arabic coin had been mounted as a pendant and worn on a thread round her neck (12; Audy 2018: 300–1). She was wearing a silk shawl round her shoulders, partly covering the oval brooches. The shawl was edged with a continuous silver-threaded 1 cm-wide brickband of type B3 (see Larsson 2001) and was probably fastened with one of the circular brooches. There were also traces of a very coarse-weave wool (a cloak or blanket?) of unknown location in the grave, perhaps supporting the idea that this was a winter burial.

A number of objects had been placed in and around the chamber. Beside the presumed location of the chair, lying on the floor of the grave, was a sword in a wooden sheath (1). Between the sword and the chair was a collection of female toilet implements: a pair of iron scissors (7) and beside them a pair of tweezers, two awls and a needle-case. Against the west wall of the grave chamber a shield had been leant (3) with its front side towards the wall, and positioned directly in line with the chair; the shield was possibly repaired with a riveted patch (5).

South of the shield, in line with the sword, was an iron staff (2). As in many of the Birka chamber-graves, the objects in Bj. 834 were laid out with some care, aligned at neat right angles to the sides of the grave. The staff as it lay in the grave when found is an exception to this, which suggests that it may have come to rest in this position having fallen from an upright placement against the chamber's end wall, near the shield which was clearly

propped up in this way. Kyhlberg (1980b: 275) suggests that the staff was deliberately placed with its pointed tip under the pommel of the sword, but the field drawing is very ambiguous here and we have no other source – it is not clear that the tip actually *is* under the sword rather than just touching it, and in any case this position could equally be a chance result of the object falling as the chamber decayed. This object is discussed extensively below.

At the foot of the grave, up against the horse platform, was a riveted wooden box (20), on top of which had been placed a wooden bucket with iron handle and rim mounts (23). Immediately to the north of the box and bucket was another wooden box with iron nails and mounts (24), quite simple though perhaps with a small silver mount. Lying on the floor of the chamber at the east end was a bundle of 15 arrows, probably in a quiver (21). We can probably presume a bow too, now decayed, but lying somewhere nearby on the chamber floor.

The two pairs of crampons (18 & 19), presumably attached to shoes, present a problem. Are these 'Hel shoes', the *helskór* mentioned in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* 14 as being fixed with special bindings to the feet of the dead to speed their journey to Valholl? They are only mentioned in this one source, but it is interesting that – despite their name – the destination towards which they will aid the wearer's journey is specifically the hall of Óðinn, not just the realm of the dead in general (see Strömbäck 1961). In the reconstruction drawing I have suggested here that the man was wearing cramponed shoes (find 18, slightly larger than the crampons from find 19), while the woman had no need of them because she would ride to the next world in the wagon implied by the presence of the harnessed and cramponed horses. The footwear represented by find 19 cannot have been worn by either of the people in the chair, and so they are shown here as a separate pair of (woman's?) shoes, ready for use at the foot of the grave.

Finally, a lance (22) – in the form of its metal head, the shaft having decayed – was found embedded at a downward-sloping angle in the wooden facing of the horse platform, about 15 cm from the floor of the chamber. The head had penetrated some 30 cm into the wood, leaving only 15 cm of iron still exposed, thus indicating that it must have been thrown into the wall with very considerable force. The angle of the head suggests that

whoever cast it was standing on the northwest lip of the grave, behind and to the left of the people in the chair, looking from the lance-thrower's point of view. Other lances from the Birka chamber-graves have been estimated as having a total length of 2.5–3 m (Gräslund 1980: 31); if this figure is applied to the lance in grave Bj. 834 then this would mean that the thrown weapon could have cleared the edge of the grave and the bodies in the chair, and hit the wall at an angle of about 45 degrees, an estimate which also appears to match the angle of the embedded lance-head as shown in Stolpe's original field drawing. The base of the lance shaft would therefore be almost level with the edge of the grave cut, and the shaft would have extended obliquely across the grave chamber over the people in the chair. The relative chronology of the actions suggested here is supported by the fact that the obstructive presence of the lance would have made it extremely difficult to furnish the chamber after it had been thrown, and it is therefore very likely that the lance was cast into the chamber wall after the grave contents had been arranged, perhaps as the last act before the chamber was closed.

In its totality, the burial in Bj. 834 is hard to interpret, but clearly very special. The presence of the harnessed draught horses suggests an absent wagon, which is almost always a funerary vehicle of high-status women in Viking-Age graves. Does this imply that the woman in Bj. 834 was the most important occupant? The staff is the only object that directly suggests an association with sorcery, but it is one of the four such objects which can be interpreted most securely. The possibility that the dead woman was a *volva* or similar must be regarded as every strong.

One element in particular is striking – the throwing of the spear into the completed burial chamber. It is important to note that the spear's trajectory would have carried it *over* the bodies in the chair, as the Old Norse sources record several instances of this practice. In *Ynglingasaga* 9, Óðinn declares that all those who are to go to him after death are to be marked with the point of a spear; in *Flateyjarbók* 11, a spear is shot over an enemy host at the start of a battle, to dedicate them to the god; and in *Voluspá* 24 it is Óðinn's casting of a spear over an army that precipitates the war between the divine families (see also Ellis Davidson 1964: 51ff and Turville-Petre

1964: 43 for more examples). The precision of this action is surely comparable with the spear cast into Bj. 834. There would seem little doubt that its occupants were dedicated to Óðinn, the god of *seiðr*, which would of course fit with the presence of the staff (see Kitzler 2000 and Artelius 2006 for more on Viking-Age spear rituals, including examples from Birka).

Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845, Björkö, Uppland, Sweden

Bj. 845 was a chamber grave under a mound, standing on its own inside the town wall, at the southern end of cemetery sector 1B. From its position relative to the second gap in the wall (counting from the south), it seems likely that the mound post-dated the construction of the rampart and had been raised beside a road leading out of the town.

The chamber was relatively small, only 1.8 × 1 m, and oriented west–east. The walls were lined with horizontally-laid logs, up to a height of 0.45 m above the floor (Arbman 1943: 319f; Figs 3.13–3.15).

Of the skeleton, a nearly complete skull was all that remained. From the size and shape of the chamber, and the position of the grave-goods, there is again a strong likelihood that the dead person – assumed to be a woman – was buried sitting in a chair. This would have been facing east, and positioned roughly central in the chamber with a centre of gravity just east of object 4 on the plan.

On her belt hung a leather pouch (un-numbered), a small whetstone (9) and a small iron knife (10), with silver wire on its handle. She was wearing conventional Viking-Age female dress, including two unique oval brooches of Berdal type (1; see Jansson 1985: 32f, 136) and a large circular bronze brooch (2). Beside the latter was a row of pendants (3; Audy 2018: 302) – two coins and two small oriental pieces – and a glass bead (6), all presumably once strung together on a string. She also wore a small circular bronze brooch (4) and what appears to have been a separate necklace with three beads (8).

Over her dress the woman was wearing a woollen cloak lined and trimmed with beaver fur, and perhaps fastened with one of the circular brooches. Like the woman in Bj. 660, she was also buried with a silver-embroidered silk band 1.5 cm wide (7) around her temples, just above the

eyes. We do not know if this was a head-band alone, or if it held a scarf or something similar in place.

Resting across the woman's knees, with its 'handle' pointing towards the north wall, was an iron staff (11). It was probably cradled in her hands. The shaft extended down to the floor on the woman's right side, where it rested inside a wooden bucket with an iron handle and iron nails around the base (13). Roughly 30 cm high, the bucket stood on the floor of the chamber at the mid-point of the south long wall. The bucket's handle was standing vertically, resting against the shaft of the staff (see Fig. 3.15).

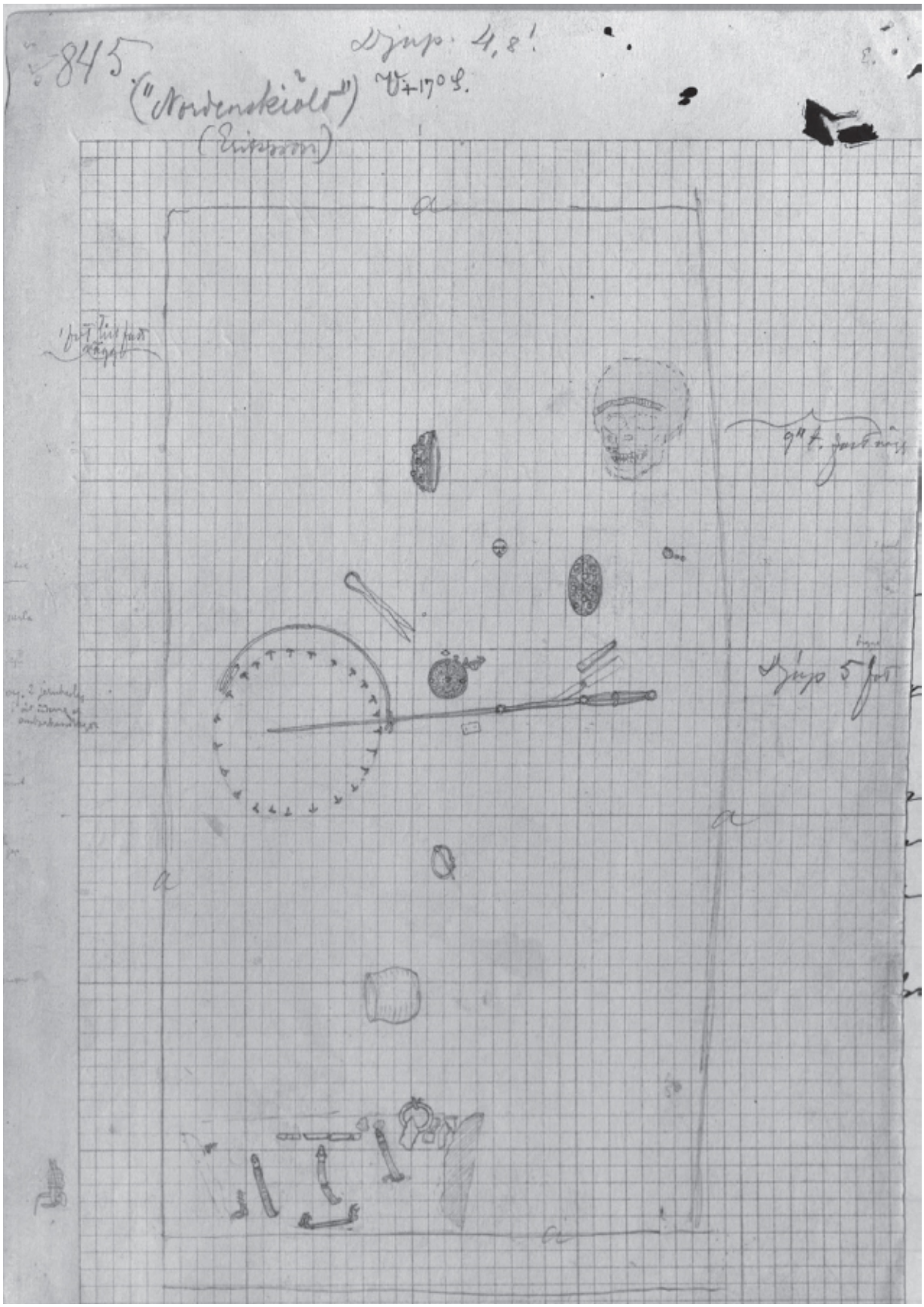
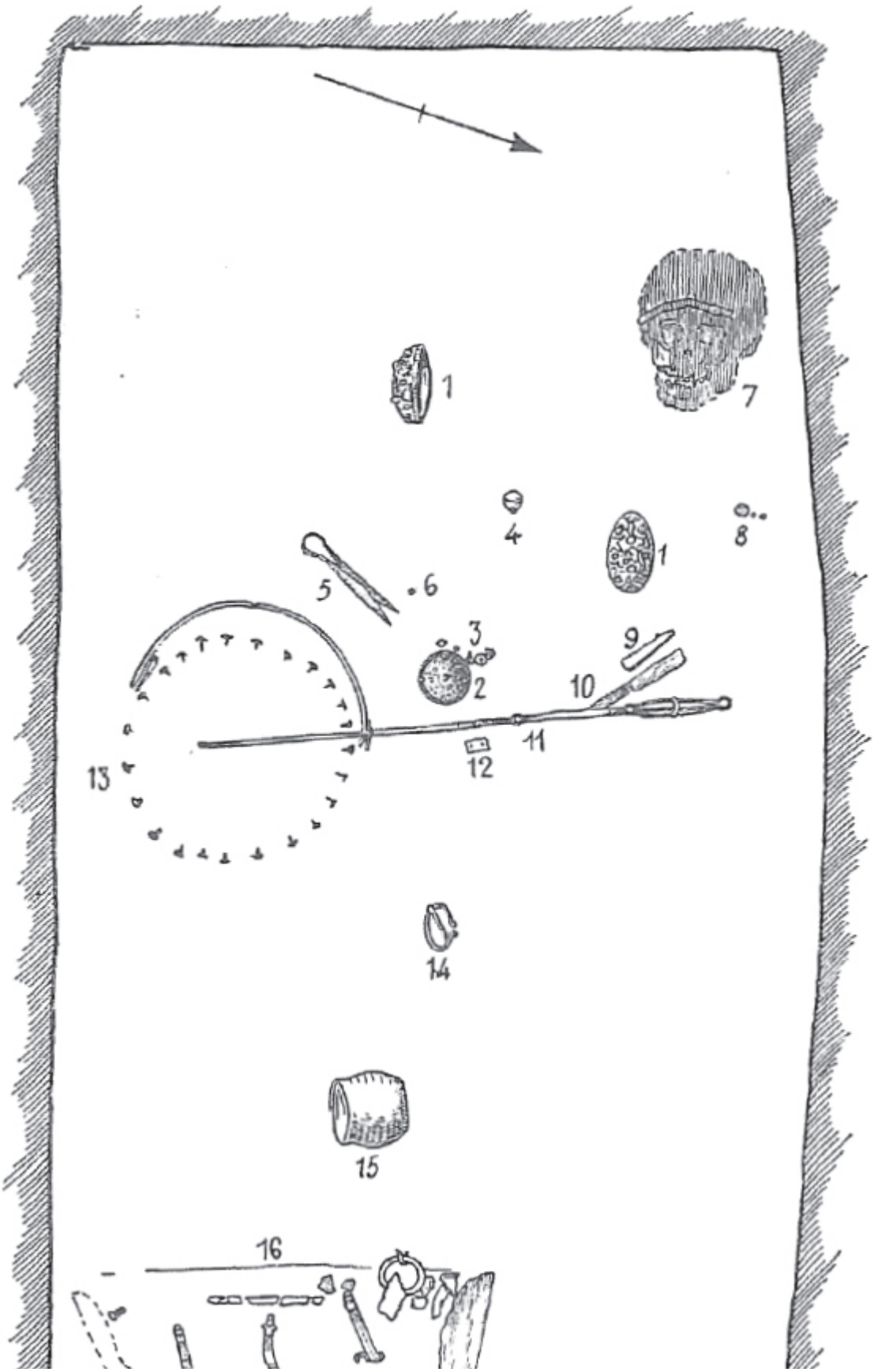

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("Nordenskiöld")
(Entwurf)
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Fig. 3.13 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845 (field drawing by Hjalmar Stolpe, ATA Stockholm, in the public domain)

At the foot of the grave in the southeast corner was a heavily ornamented iron box, studded with nails and with complex animal-head fasteners (16). On top of it was resting an iron ring with a knotted fastening, 5 cm in diameter. No finds were recovered from the box, so it was either buried empty or filled with organic materials – probably clothing. The box has a very close parallel in the Oseberg ship burial, discussed below, where a similar chest contained what appears to be a set of equipment for cultic activities, including a possible staff of sorcery.

On the floor of the chamber south of the chair was a pair of iron shears (5), with beside them a pair of tweezers. These had probably been laid in the woman’s lap. Near her feet a pennanular brooch (14) was found, which may have been placed in the grave as the fastening on a folded cloak which has since decayed. At the east end of the chamber was a ceramic urn (15), resting on the floor just west of the box.


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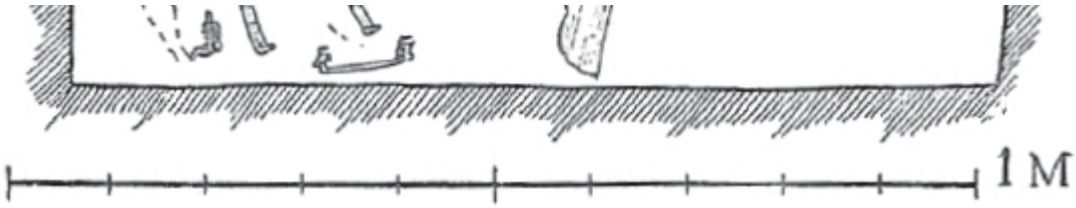


Fig. 3.14 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845 (drawing by Harald Olsson after Arbman 1943: 320)

This was the latest of the four ‘staff graves’ at Birka, with the coin pendants providing a *terminus post quem* of 925– 943 for the construction of the chamber (Arwidsson 1986: 166). Like Bj. 660, the position of the staff indicates that this was a primary requisite of the grave-goods, and testifies to its significance for the dead woman.

Ancient monuments 59:2 and 59:3, Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland, Sweden
The most spectacular of the possible ‘*volva* graves’ from Sweden was excavated in 1957 on the west coast of Öland, at Klinta in Köping parish. In the Viking Age this was the site of a small beach market, with clusters of burial mounds on the higher ground overlooking the sea (Petersson 1964: ch. 5; Fig. 3.16). At first the archaeological investigation, which took place under rescue conditions and was necessarily somewhat hurried, explored what were thought to be separate grave mounds composed of stone cairns. As the excavation progressed, it emerged that at least two of the mounds formed part of a single, complex funerary act. We shall here focus on the mounds designated 59:2 and 59:3, their numbering following the register of ancient monuments in the parish (the burials were described in outline by the excavator K. G. Petersson in 1958, with an expanded description in his licenciate thesis from 1964; a third report is collected in Schulze 1987: 55–62, 102–12, with further discussions by Svanberg 2003b: 132f, 252f and Hedenstierna-Jonson 2015a).



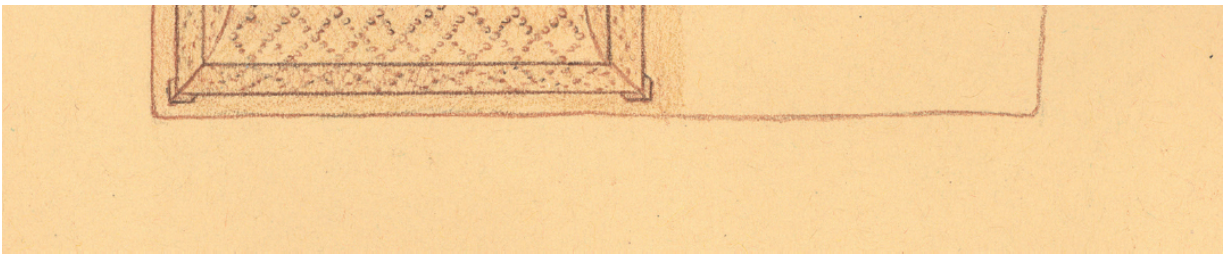


Fig. 3.15 Reconstruction of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

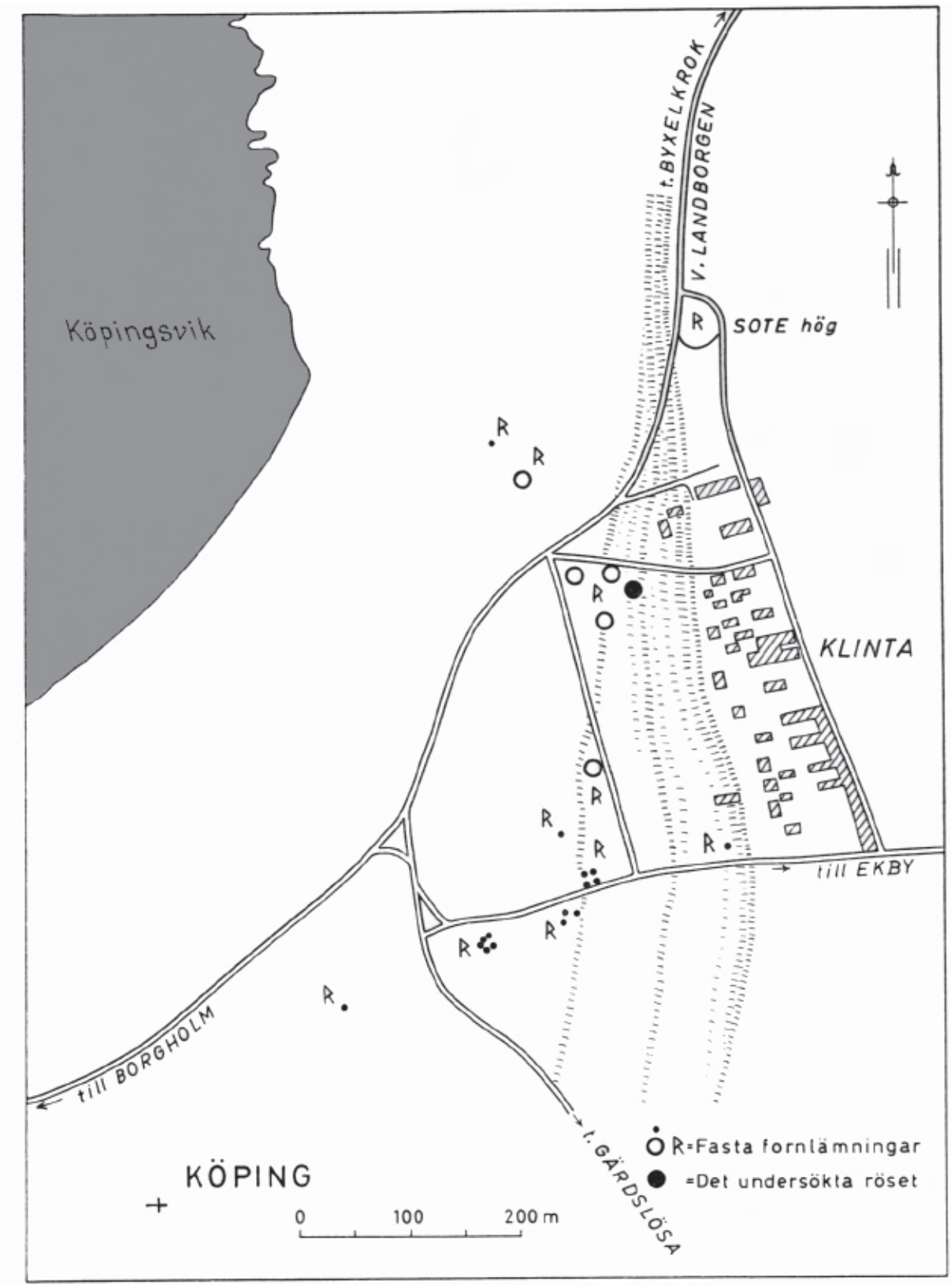

Köpingsvik
t. BYXELKROK
V. LANDBORGEN
SOTE hög
KLINTA
till EKBY
till BORGHOLM
t. GÅRDSLÖSA
KÖPING
0
100
200 m
R=Fasta fornlämningar
=Det undersökta röset

Fig. 3.16 Location plan for graves 59:2 and 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland. The woman's grave is shown as the black dot ('det undersökta röset'), while the man's grave is the mound shown immediately to the north-west of it at the edge of the road (after Petersson 1958: 135; drawing by K. G. Petersson).

Sometime in the first half of the tenth century – a dating based on the artefactual assemblage – two adults, a man and a woman, were cremated together on the heath above the beach at Klinta. The funeral perhaps took place in the autumn, on the basis of rowan berries and hazelnuts found in the ashes. The pyre had been constructed at the very edge of cultivated fields, equidistant between a clearance cairn and the beginning of the tilled soil – perhaps a kind of liminal zone. The two people had been laid out in a boat, which from the quantities of nails and ship-rivets found in the cremation deposits could have been up to 10 m long. Finds of bear claws and paw bones suggest that the dead couple either lay upon one or more bearskins, or were covered by them on the pyre. Around them had been laid a very large number of objects of different kinds, together with the bodies of animals.

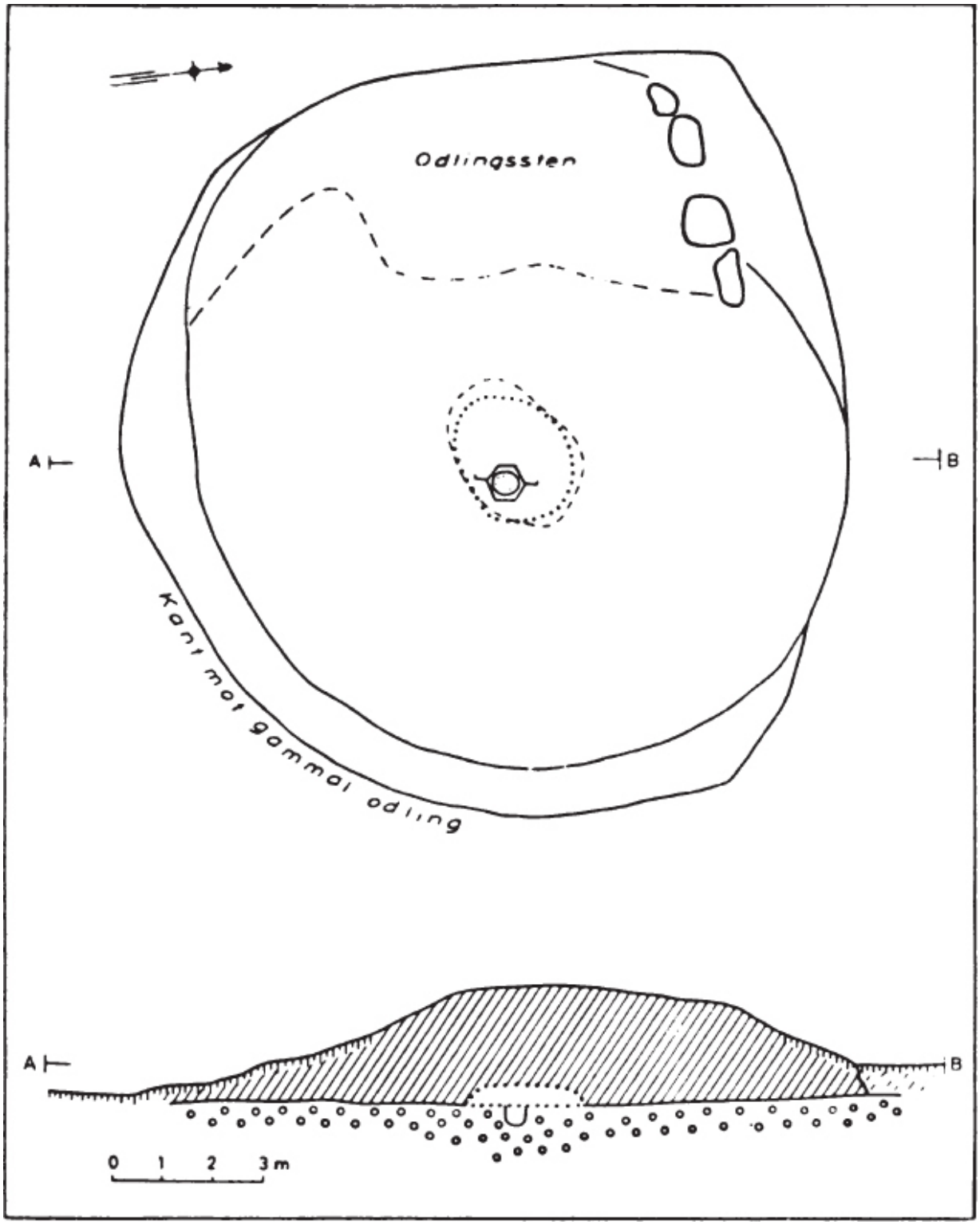


Fig. 3.17 Plan and section drawings of the woman's grave, 59:3, at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland. In the centre of the mound the cremation pit can be seen, covered by its hexagonal 'lid' and the two layers of pyre material and

limestone chips. The stones shown at the mound's north-western edge belong to a Viking Age clearance cairn which was partially buried under the barrow (after Petersson 1958: 136; drawing by K. G. Petersson).

After the fire had died down, an attempt was made to separate and remove the cremated remains of the man and the woman. The woman's ashes were then buried within the remains of the pyre and a mound raised above them (monument 59:3; Fig. 3.17), while the man's remains were buried nearby and covered by a second mound (59:2). This interpretation of a double cremation followed by separate burial was first put forward by Petersson (1964: 31f); I agree with his analysis, and refer the reader to his thesis for a detailed review of the stratigraphic background to his suggestion. We can consider these two graves and the evidence for their funerary rituals in detail.

When the human remains had been retrieved, they were washed clean in preparation for their further treatment. At the site of the pyre, the next action seems to have been the excavation of a pit 0.45 m in diameter, placed centrally and dug down through the ash to cut some 0.4 m into the gravel sub-soil beneath. The gravel thus displaced was then built up as a raised ring around the edge of the pit, standing out against the black ashes. The exact sequence of events is impossible to determine, but at or about the same time a substantial portion of the pyre debris was set aside and transported a few metres away to be used to form the adjacent man's grave.



Fig. 3.18 The urn containing the washed bones of the woman in mound 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (after Petersson 1958: 139; photographed in situ *by K. G. Petersson).*

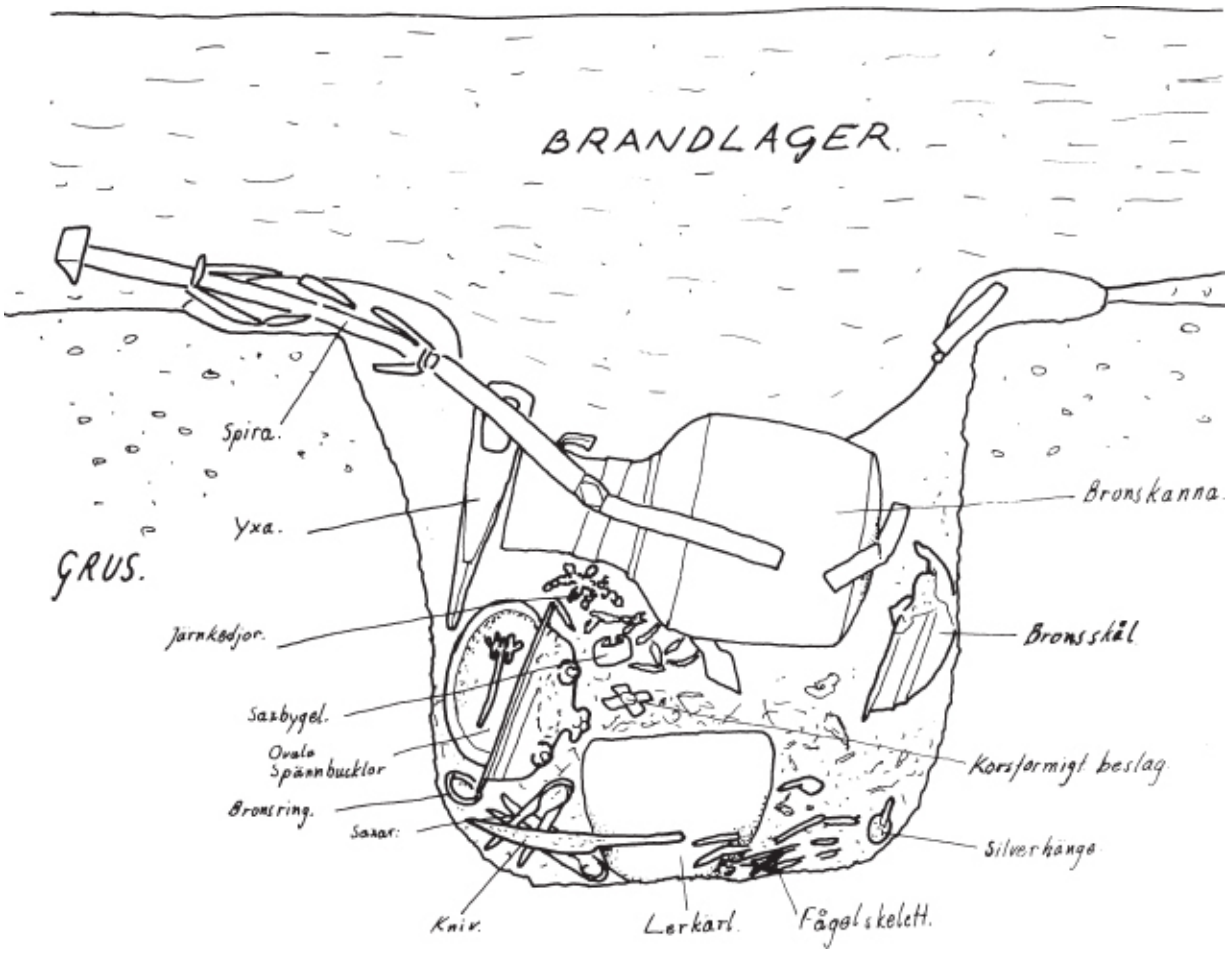


Fig. 3.19 Section drawing through the cremation pit under the remains of the pyre, grave 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland. The urn containing the woman's burnt bones can be seen at the base of the pit, surrounded by grave-goods; the staff is lying across the top of the pit, covered by the remains of the clay 'lid' (after Schulze 1987: 59; from a field drawing by K. G. Petersson).

About 2 litres of the woman's bones, probably unintentionally mixed with a very small quantity of the man's remains, were then placed in a small pottery vessel (Fig. 3.18). This was deposited at the bottom of the pit under the pyre. Next to the vessel had been laid the unburnt body of a freshly-killed hen. After this, a number of diverse objects had been packed in around and above the cremation urn, filling the pit (Fig. 3.19):



Fig. 3.20 The two curled copper sheets with runic inscriptions from grave 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (after Schulze 1987: 109).

- a silver pendant with relief ornament of a kneeling man with two bird-like figures on his shoulders
- a bronze jug, 26 cm high
- a bronze basin
- 2 bronze oval brooches of type P51
- 2 bronze cruciform mounts
- 2 bronze decorated rings
- 2 bronze strap-ends
- a bronze trapezoidal mount with interlace decoration and an animal head terminal
- 2 copper sheets (Öl 83 and 84), each with one end rolled for suspension and a fragmentary runic inscription (Fig. 3.20):
  - -irþn (Nilsson 1973: 242) or -run (Gustavson 2004: 67; Pereswetoff-Morath 2017: 215), probably meaning ‘secret’ or ‘secret knowledge’
  - side A: a...f..aþlufalu...þr (Nilsson 1973: 242) or aistrtaubalufalarai (Pereswetoff-Morath 2017: 216), with an undeciperhable inscription on side B; the legible text on side A is possibly a magical formula, but in any case apparently has lexical meaning
- 2 pairs of iron shears, one with an attached silver ring
- 2 iron knives
- an iron wood-working cramp
- a bearded, slim-bladed battle-axe of Petersen’s Type C

- an L-formed iron key
- 25 fragments of a slim iron chain
- 2 fragments of iron hook-eyes
- 151 beads of carnelian, rock crystal, glass and glass paste
- a Þórr’s hammer ring of iron, badly damaged, with four small Þórr’s hammers
- 30+ fragments of iron mounts, probably from an iron-bound bucket
- a bronze fragment of a brooch or part of a reins-distributor
- bronze fragments and melted droplets
- 40+ fragments of iron mounts of various forms
- 2 rowan berries

When the pit had been filled with objects, and further packed with earth and ash from the pyre, a large metal staff had been laid horizontally across the top. This object can be interpreted as a possible staff of sorcery, but is unique in form even amongst others of its kind, being decorated with animal heads and surmounted with a small model of a building. It is discussed in detail later in this chapter.



Fig. 3.21 Photograph showing the cremation pit before excavation, under the remains of the pyre in grave 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland. The staff can be clearly seen embedded in the remains of the hexagonal clay 'lid', as can the bronze jug (after Schulze 1987: 61; photo by K. G. Petersson).

After the staff had been placed across the mouth of the cut, the pit was then sealed in a manner that seems to be unique in Viking-Age excavated contexts. A 'lid' had been constructed of grey chalk-rich clay, built around a framework of twigs or bracken, and carefully shaped in a deliberately angular hexagon (in terms of its construction, this 'lid' was effectively built like a clay-daub wall). The 'lid' was then placed over the cremation pit in such a manner as to cover the shaft of the staff, while leaving the end with the building model projecting out from under it on the northern side (Fig. 3.21).

When these preparations had been completed, the remaining debris from the pyre was swept up and laid over the sealed pit, in a layer up to 0.45 m thick and with a diameter of 2–3 m. This layer of burnt material contained a number of artefacts, the small size of which suggests that they had simply not been retrieved from the smoking ashes.

They included the following, either whole or in the form of burnt fragments:

- an Abbasid silver coin minted for al-Amīn in 801–804
- parts of an equal-armed brooch
- 33 beads of rock crystal, carnelian and glass paste
- 2 bronze rim-mounts decorated with animal heads
- a circular bronze pendant, badly burnt
- 2 iron rim-mounts
- 4 iron mounts with pierced triangular decoration
- 10 fragments of an iron strip with double rows of punched ornaments
- 3 fragments of iron plates with folded edges
- 5 fragments of iron rods

- a fragment of a bronze strip
- a fragment of a reins-distributor for a pair of horses
- an iron hook, possibly part of a horse-bit
- a glass linen-smoother
- a charred wooden handle for an unknown object
- fragments of an antler shaft for an unknown object
- iron fragments and melted droplets
- hazelnut shells

This layer also contained the majority of the ship-rivets, 18 whole examples and over 300 burnt fragments.

The ashes of the pyre also contained 14.7 litres of cremated animal bone, the remains of the creatures that had been burnt together with the two people. The exact numbers of each animal could not be determined – and an almost equal amount of their remains had been removed with the ashes for the man's grave – but among the species represented were horse, cow, pig, sheep, dog, cat and several unidentified birds. As mentioned above, a few bones of a bear were also found but these strongly imply a pelt rather than the whole animal.

The remains of the pyre were then buried in turn under a level surface of limestone chips, spread out evenly over the burnt material. Above this was raised a stone cairn, 13 m in diameter and 2 m high. Granite and limestone blocks up to 0.5 m in size had been placed down first, with the surface of the mound carefully composed of smaller stones which had been laid to form an even dome. The mound had never been covered by earth, and was intended to be seen as a cairn. Its dimensions exactly spanned the zone at the edge of the fields, incorporating the clearance cairn to the north-west and just overlying the agricultural soil to the south-east.

The site chosen for the burial of the man's remains was 5 m north-west of the woman's cairn, also within the border zone between the tilled fields and the clearance cairns at their edge (Fig. 3.22). However, his grave was constructed actually adjacent to a large pile of such stones, the whole of which was buried under the mound that was later raised. No pit was made for the man, nor were his remains grouped together. Instead, his cremated

bones were mixed up with the debris that had been removed from the pyre, the whole mass of ashes then being spread out in a layer up to 0.25 m thick over a 2 × 3 m area.

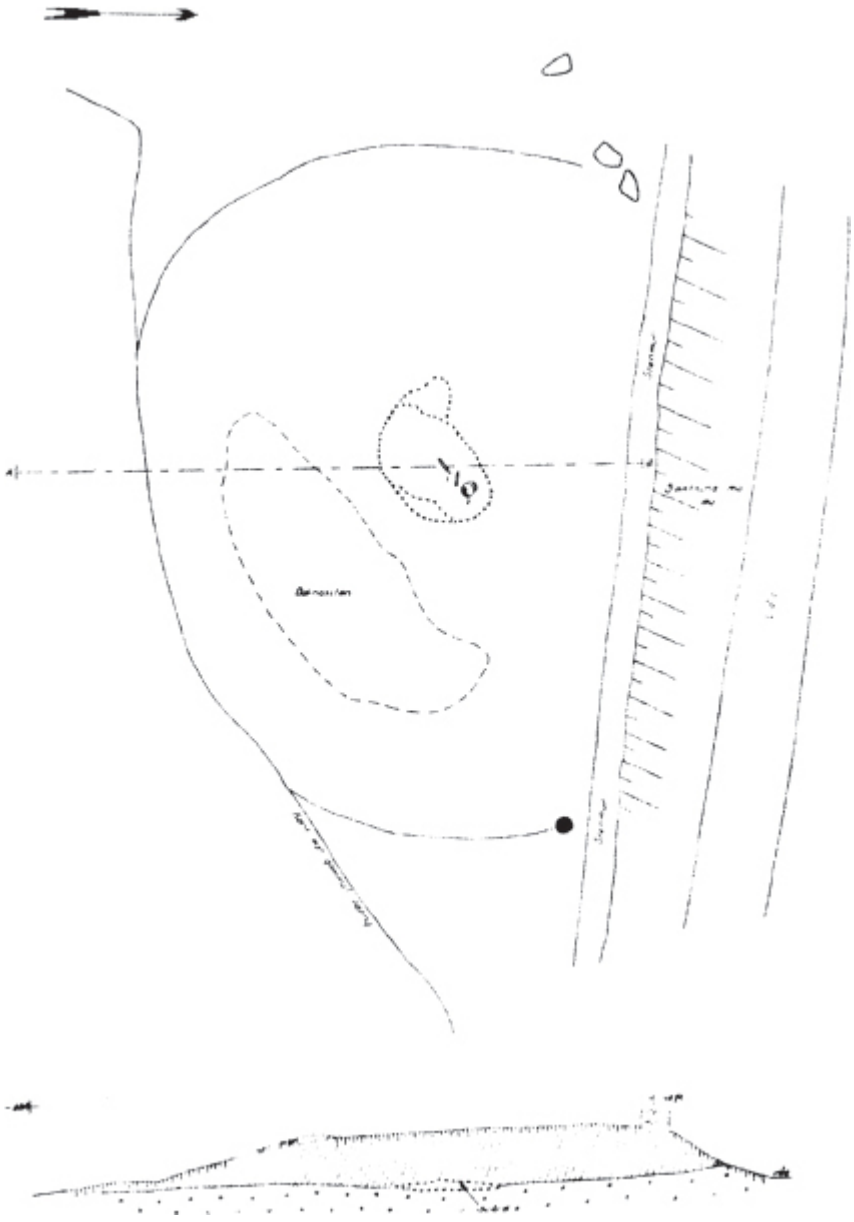


Fig. 3.22 Plan and section drawings of the man's grave, 59:2, at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland. In the centre of the mound the pile of cremation debris can be seen, secondarily deposited adjacent to a Viking Age clearance cairn which was subsequently buried under the barrow (after Petersson 1964: Fig. 9; drawing by K. G. Petersson).

This burnt deposit contained over 10 litres of cremated bone, almost all of which derived from animals. Only horse and dog were found, which implies that the animals too were separated from the pyre to be laid specifically in each grave. Bear claws and paw bones were again found, suggesting that another pelt followed the man in death.

Only a very small quantity of the ashes belonged to the man. Clearly, very much less of his remains were collected – by comparison with the treatment of the woman, it almost seems as if only a symbolic amount of the man's bones was buried.

Most of the objects buried with the man were spread out randomly through the burnt deposit. They included the following, either whole or in the form of burnt fragments:

- a silver Abbasid coin minted for al-Mamum, 809–810
- a bronze oval brooch of type P51
- a bronze button
- 10 bronze buttons of a different pattern
- 4 bronze trapezoidal mounts with interlace decoration and an animal head terminal
- fragments of up to 16 cruciform bronze mounts
- a pair of bronze scales
- over 200 ship-rivets
- a sword, of Petersen type M/E (1919)
    - this had been snapped in two before cremation; the pointed end had been buried apparently haphazardly amongst the debris from the pyre, but the part with the hilt had been plunged into the cremation layer and left to stand vertically above it
- 8 iron mounts with pierced triangular decoration
- 16 beads of rock crystal, gold and silver foil, glass and glass paste
- a bone comb
- a bone needle
- 18 gaming pieces – 1 of bone, 17 of Öland limestone

    - these had been burnt, but were buried in a wooden, iron-bound and decorated bucket that had probably not been on the pyre
- a semi-circular gaming board of bone
- a slate whetstone
- a fragmentary wooden object, 2.3 cm long and bored hollow

The burnt layer containing the man's remains was then covered by a stone cairn, 15 m in diameter and 1.3 m high, made up of limestone and granite rocks up to 0.4 m in size with a fill of sand between. Unlike the adjacent woman's grave, the cairn was covered with turf and would have had the appearance of an earthen mound.

The rituals of which we find the material remains are complex enough, and become only more so when we consider all the probable actions that did not leave such traces in the archaeology. From this and the quality of the artefactual assemblage it is clear that at least one and possibly both of the dead were of considerable status.

In themselves, with few exceptions the grave-goods are not remarkable in the context of such elite burials. We find a range of ordinary domestic items, and also craft-related material: equipment used in textile production, wood-working, and balances for trade (it is interesting that there are no weights). Weapons are present (an interesting absence of spears and arrows), as are the leisure activities of the privileged, in the form of the gaming set. The jewellery is of high quality, and the various buttons and other dress accessories suggest that the clothes of the dead were also impressive. The bear pelt(s) fit in well with this picture.

The various mounts and fragments of decorated bronze and iron also suggest the presence of boxes, chests, buckets and similar items (see the reports on the Klinta grave for detailed parallels for these objects). To this we can probably add a variety of wooden articles, items made of organic materials such as clothing and textiles, and quantities of food and drink. There also seems to have been a full set of horse harness on the pyre, with equipment both for riding and drawing a wagon.

The animals represent all the domesticated creatures on a prosperous farm, together with the horse(s) that could have served both as a draught

animal and a mount, the domestic cat and the dog which can to some extent be regarded as animals of the elite. The birds, of unknown species, may also represent hunting activities which were also an attribute of society's upper strata.

Several singular features are however present in these two burials. Firstly, boat cremations are very rare on Öland, and beyond the small group of them at Klinta (there were three more in addition to that under discussion) only three Viking-Age burials of this kind are known from the island, all from the same site at Karlevi in Vickleby parish; one further cemetery at Nabberör in the north of Öland contains a burial of an unburnt boat (Schulze 1987: 56f). Clearly, on Öland the rite of boat cremation seems to have been exceptional in itself.

The find of a Viking-Age sword is almost unique among Öland graves. The axe is also especially interesting, as it was at least 150 years old when placed in the grave. Probably dating from the Vendel period, though perhaps made as late as *c.*800, it may have been some kind of family heirloom. We obviously do not know whether the age of the axe was important, but we should perhaps recall here the knife with a broken point mentioned among the *volva*'s tools in *Eiríks saga rauða* – perhaps the axe was 'special' in some way too? Though the excavator does not comment upon it, in the section drawing of the burial pit it is clear that the axe lay with the blade downwards. The handle would have burned on the pyre so it could not have been swung into the ground, but the manner of its placement recalls the man's grave, in the ashes of which the sword had been stuck point-down. This ritual is known in four graves from Birka (Gräslund 1980: 76), and Nordberg has collected nineteen more in addition to the Klinta grave (2002: 18f); there are also related examples from Finland, with spears used as coffin nails (Wickholm 2006). Weapons embedded in Viking-Age grave deposits are of several types, sometimes with several in the same burial – a total of 15 swords, 15 spears and 7 axes are known to have been buried in this way. Using a variety of supporting criteria, Nordberg has argued convincingly that the rite was one of dedication to Óðinn (*ibid*: 20–3), which would apply doubly in the case of the Klinta graves with the sword and axe.

At Klinta, the coins, like the axe, were also old when placed in the grave. Other artefacts from the burial are more individually interesting. The most striking of these, the metal staff with its model building, is discussed below. The jug, which would have been of very considerable value in the Viking period, is of a kind found elsewhere in Sweden and had its origins in the Orient, perhaps in Turkestan or Persia (Petersson 1958: 142 lists the parallels from Gotland, Åland and the grave from Aska in Hagebyhöga which is considered below as another possible 'sorceress' burial). The bronze basin probably came from the western European mainland.

The curious silver pendant with its design of a kneeling man also bears closer scrutiny. The object was originally a mount of some kind, re-used as a pendant through the addition of a suspension loop. Several details of the male figure can be discerned: he is shown kneeling in profile, with his head turned to present a full-face view; he has a long moustache, and either a cap with a tassel or perhaps an elaborate hairstyle with a pony-tail; he wears a shirt, belt, widely gathered trousers, and possibly shoes. In his hands he appears to hold long band-like objects, and above each of his shoulders is something that appears to be a bird. Petersson (1958: 143) speculated that the 'bands' are snakes, or that they are tethers for the birds, which could then be interpreted as hawks or similar hunting birds.

The image was compared by Petersson (*ibid*: 143f) to the snake-holding ?woman on the Smiss III picture stone from När parish on Gotland, discussed later in this chapter, and for which both Lindqvist (1955: 45–8) and Arwidsson (1963: 166–70) sought Celtic parallels. The man's face and the snakes on the Klinta pendant have also been seen in the context of the Aspö rune-rock in Södermanland (Sö 175). None of these seems particularly convincing – if the 'bands' are not snakes then half the parallels disappear, and a moustachioed face is hardly a unique attribute in the Viking Age. An oriental origin for the pendant has also been proposed on the basis of a pendant from Birka grave Bj. 791 (Arbman 1940: pl. 95:3), and there are indeed striking similarities here.

A link of the figure to Óðinn, with the birds as Huginn and Muninn, does not seem to have been made. Even if the piece is of eastern origin, there is no reason why its motif should not have been reinterpreted in the

context of Nordic beliefs, and I would argue that its deposition in the Klinta grave may well have been understood as a reference to Óðinn. Along with the Þórr's hammer ring, this would thus bring two gods into the symbolic language of the Klinta grave.

There is also the matter of the separate burial of the two individuals, and the selection of artefacts to accompany them. The man's grave, 59:2, contained the following combinations:

- conventionally assumptive 'male' items
  - sword
  - set of balances
  - gaming set
  - elaborate belt set
  - large whetstone
- conventionally assumptive 'female' items
  - oval brooch
  - beads
  - bone needle

The woman's grave, 59:3, contained the following combinations:

- conventionally assumptive 'female' items
  - oval brooches
  - beads
  - pendants
  - shears
  - key
  - harness for draught horses
  - equal-armed brooch (from the pyre debris)
  - linen smoother (from the pyre debris)
- conventionally assumptive 'male' items
  - battle-axe

- wood-working tools

The woman’s grave also contained the majority of the ship-rivets.

With slight reservations, both the excavator and subsequent interpreters have seen the presence of ‘female’ and ‘male’ objects in the graves of the opposite sex as most probably coincidental, a product of an arbitrary division of the grave-goods from the pyre (Petterson 1958: 139 & 1964: 32; Schulze 1987: 58; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 80). Given the care taken to separate the bones of the two individuals, and the anything but casual division of the majority of the objects, this seems unlikely. The oval brooches, for example, are the size of a human hand, and one of them can hardly have been distributed ‘accidentally’ into the man’s grave. There seems then little doubt that the arrangement of the grave-goods in the man’s and woman’s grave at Klinta was intentional, and therefore presumably meaningful. These distinctions also took other forms, as clearly there was also some reason why the external appearance of the mounds intentionally differed, though this is of course obscure to us. What can this tell us?

Firstly, the deposition of so many objects conventionally associated with the opposite sex is unusual in Viking-Age graves. At Klinta, the woman was buried with woodworking tools and a weapon of war, while the man was buried with female jewellery and needlework tools. The ambiguous gender statements thus made should not be over-interpreted, but it is important to note that they implicate both individuals, and that the two graves are definitely part of the same funerary event. If the woman was a *volva* or something similar, on the grounds of her staff, then was the man a *seiðmaðr* or one of the other male users of magic? Sorcerous couples are known from the literature as we have seen, and the Klinta grave certainly qualifies as a case of the ‘special treatment’ that we know such people received in death. We should remember here the sword and axe plunged vertically into the respective cremations.

In a recent study (Lihammer 2012: 193–7; see also Vänehem 2015: 31), as well as in the current (2018) Viking galleries of the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm where some of the finds from the Klinta grave are displayed, the woman has been labelled *furstinnan av Öland*, which

approximates to ‘chieftainess’, almost ‘princess’. The staff is here labelled unequivocally as a *völvastav*, but also as a kind of sceptre, a symbol of rulership. Whether this is true or not we really have no way of knowing.



Fig. 3.23 The silver pendant in the shape of a man's head, from the female cremation at Aska in Hagebyhöga in Östergötland (photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

Aska, Hagebyhöga parish, Östergötland, Sweden

In 1920 a small Viking-Age cemetery of six mounds was excavated under difficult conditions at Aska, Hagebyhöga parish, in Östergötland. In Grave 1 was found a cremation deposit beneath a 6.4 m-diameter mound, originally 1 m high and constructed on the site of the pyre. Bones of a woman and a number of animals were found, the latter including a horse, two dogs and a sheep or goat, with a concentration of remains in the centre of the mound. The burial can be dated to the ninth or tenth century (Arne 1932b: 67–82; see also discussions in Graner 2007: 53–62; Larsson 2010: 115f; Andersson 2018: 168–73).



Fig. 3.24 The pendant with a female figurine from Aska in Hagebyhöga, Östergötland; diameter 3.8 cm (photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

No detailed disposition of the grave was recorded, but the grave-goods were very rich. They included bronze oval brooches, beads of glass and rock crystal, silver pendants, a silver trefoil brooch and five silver berlocks. The burial also contained an iron kettle and a meat fork, a decorated bone

plaque (probably a board for smoothing linen), a number of iron fittings which may represent one or more boxes, and a set of ornate harness for no less than four horses. A bronze jug of Arabic manufacture was also found, of a type very similar to that from the woman's grave 59:3 at Klinta on Öland. Several loaves of bread had been laid on the funeral pyre.

Three items mark the grave as possibly that of a sorceress. The first of these was an iron staff, which is discussed in detail below. The second was a silver pendant in the form of a man's head. This object depicts a man with pronounced eyebrows and moustache, long nose and apparently pursed lips (Fig. 3.23). The crown of his head is covered helmet-like by a bird, decorated in Style E from the very beginning of the Viking period or even earlier, resting with its beak on the bridge of the man's nose (Graham-Campbell 1980a: 141). The piece was clearly old when placed in the grave, and had been adapted for use as a pendant having originally perhaps been made as a mount for a handle of some kind. The object is unlikely to represent Óðinn since it clearly has two eyes, but it may be intended as a depiction of Mímr's head, or at least understood that way by the woman who owned it, more than a hundred years after it was made. If the iron staff is accepted as a symbol of the *volur*, then a representation of Óðinn's personal oracle would fit perfectly with the theme of divination.



Fig. 3.25 A schematic drawing of the pendant with a female figurine from Aska in Hagebyhöga, Östergötland; diameter 3.8 cm (after Arrhenius 2001: 306).

The third remarkable, and unique, object from the Aska grave was a small gilded silver pendant in the form of a seated woman (Arne 1932b: 73; Arrhenius 2001: 306; Figs 3.24, 3.25). Circular in form and only 3.8 cm in size, on the pendant the woman is arranged with her skirts spread out over

either a ring or a rectangular object, and it has been suggested that the figure represents a *volva* on a *seiðr*-platform, or perhaps a figure of Freyja (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994: 67; Adolfsson & Lundström 1997: 11). The latter interpretation is supported by the woman's four-strand necklace, which may be intended as the Brísingamen which the goddess obtained from the dwarfs. Several scholars also consider that the figure is pregnant, which would also be appropriate for a fertility deity (Meulengracht Sørensen & Steinsland 1990: 40; Arrhenius 2001: 306). If the pendant does represent either Freyja or a *volva*, then it may provide us with a unique image of a *seiðr*-performer in action, sitting composed with hands in her lap, and perhaps with closed eyes.

Despite the poor recording and preservation of the grave itself, the staff and the two unusual pendants combine to make a strong case for the Aska burial as being that of a woman in contact with the supernatural. As with the other graves considered here, the richness of the objects that accompanied her on the pyre also confirm her high status.

Grave 4 from the cemetery at Fyrkat, Jylland, Denmark

In Denmark, another possible '*volva* grave' was found in the 1950s, at the tenth-century fortification at Fyrkat in Jylland. The Fyrkat circular enclosure was constructed towards the end of the reign of Haraldr blátand, its building dated by dendrochronology to around the year 980. Situated in northeast Jylland, Fyrkat is one of four such engineering projects built in Denmark at this time – the others being a similar enclosure at Trelleborg on Sjælland, another which was probably of the same kind at Nonnebakken under modern Odense, and the massive example at Aggersborg on the Limfjord. All the enclosures are circular in form, with axial streets leading to gates at the compass points, and buildings built precisely in the quadrants of the circle. Originally thought to be fortresses and often termed such today, the 'Trelleborg-type' enclosures may have served a number of purposes, all linked by the notion of bringing these functions into central places under royal supervision. They have been interpreted variously as tax-gathering installations for the co-ordination of agricultural surplus, as military assembly points, and as economic centres of craft production. There is also a possibility that they served as administrative mustering camps for Haraldr's campaign which regained southern Jylland from the Germans in 983. They perhaps combined elements of all these functions, reflecting different aspects of the king's power. By 987 Haraldr was dead, and it seems that the enclosures were abandoned soon after, rejected together with other great engineering projects such as the Ravning Enge bridge as emblems of a failed political strategy (the literature on the enclosures is extensive – for overviews see Roesdahl 1987 & 2001: 147–52).

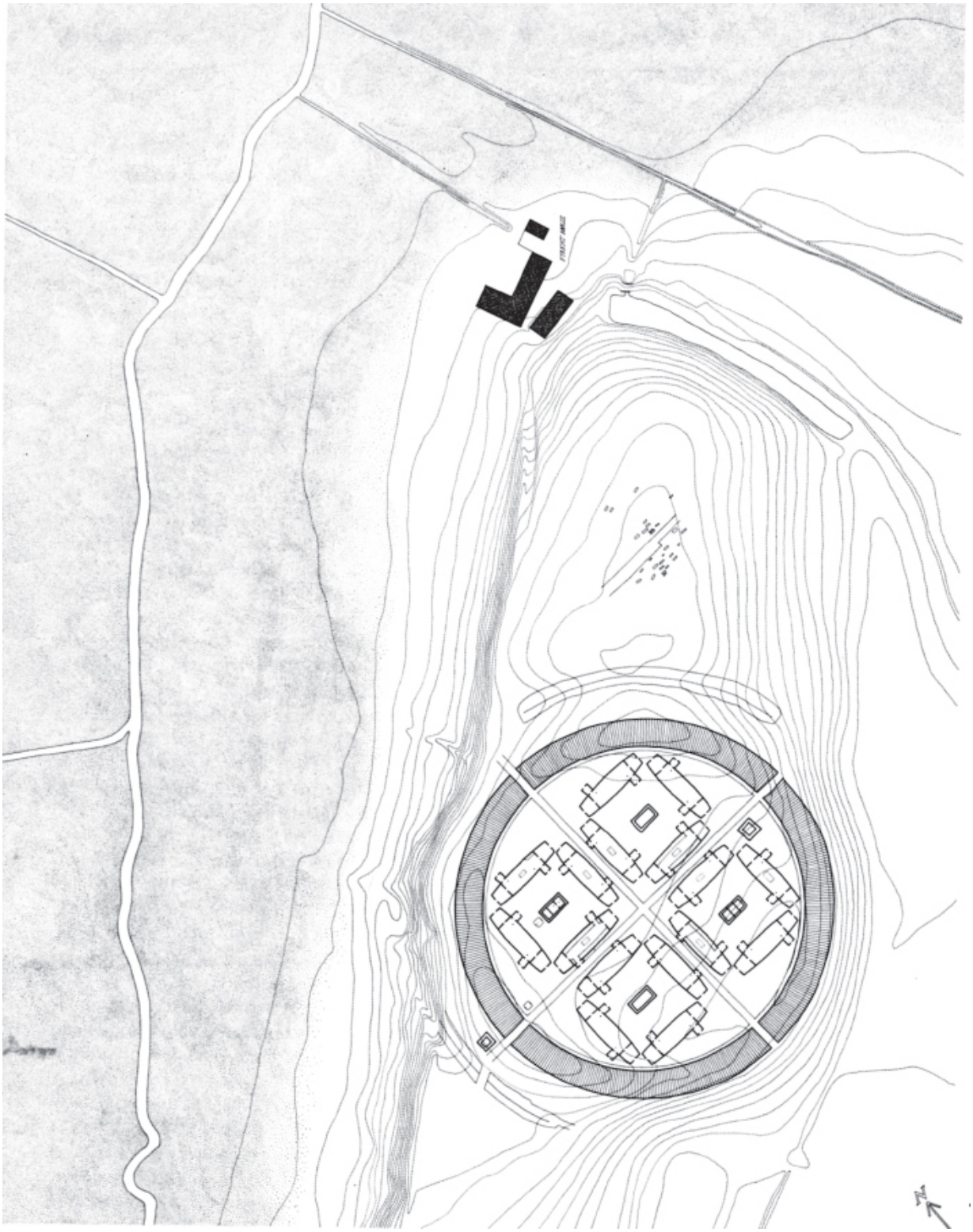


Fig. 3.26 The Fyrkat circular enclosure in its landscape, with the cemetery on the peninsula to the north-east (after Roesdahl 1977a: 8; drawing by Holger Schmidt).

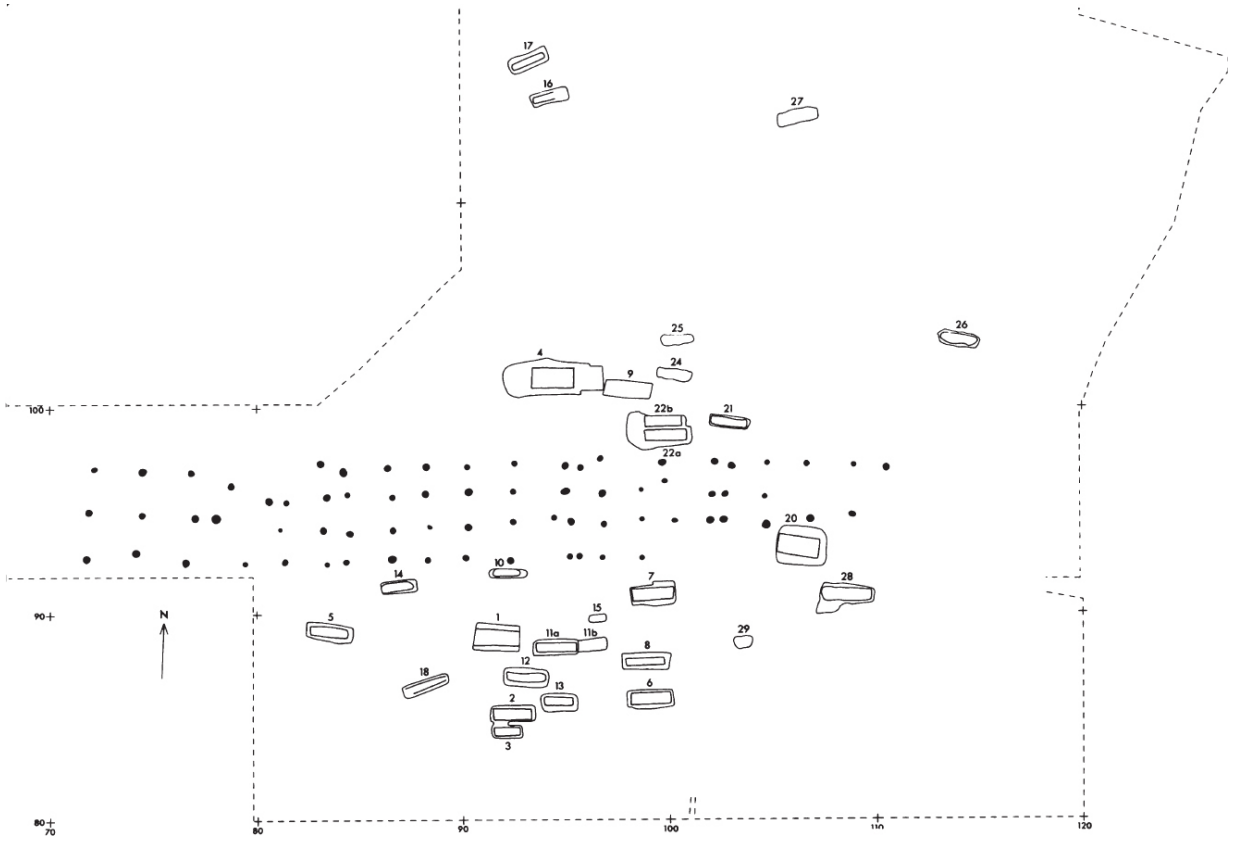


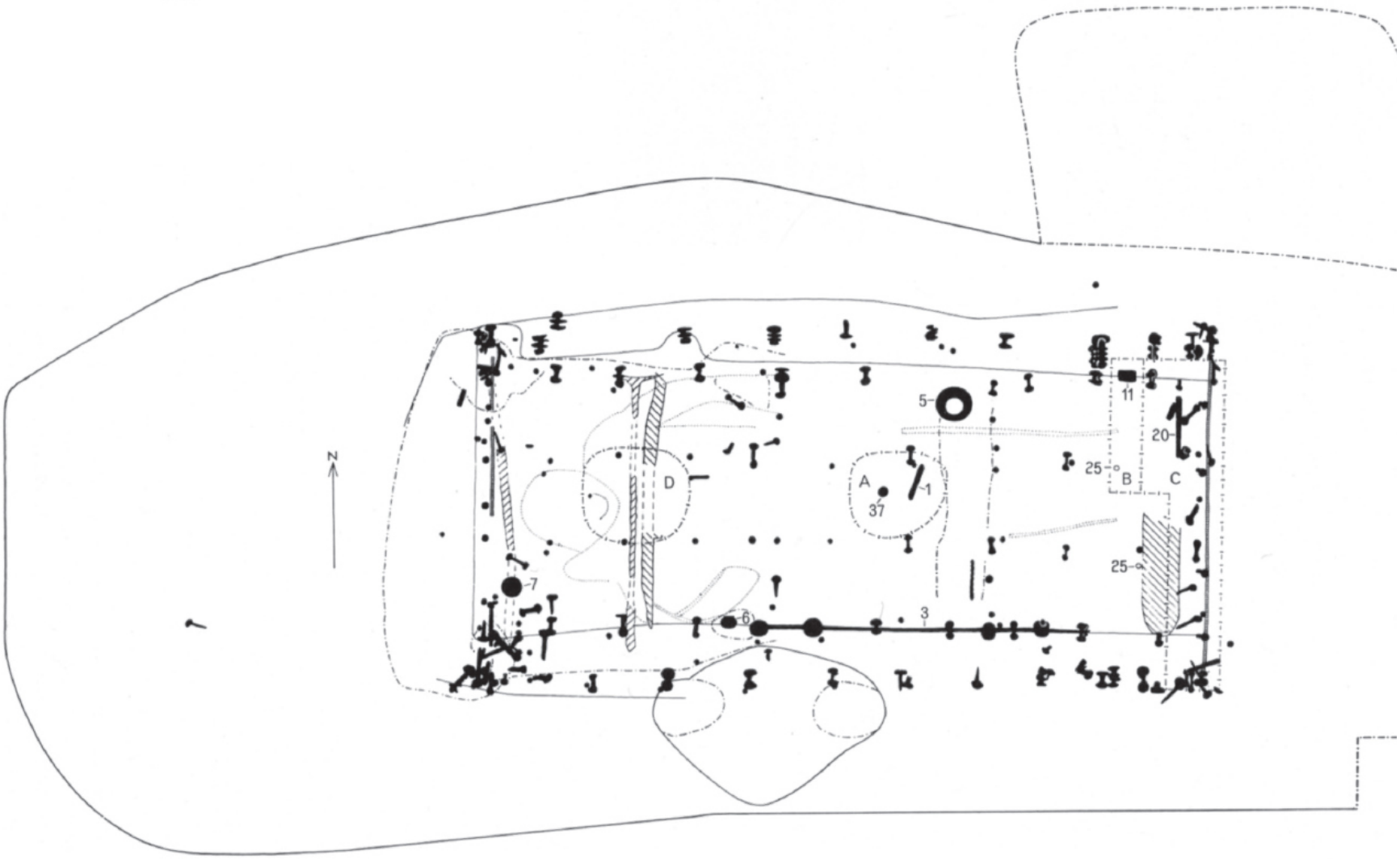
Fig. 3.27 Plan of the Fyrkat cemetery, showing the postholes of the raised 'walkway' and the outlines of the burials. Grave 4 is situated at the mid-point of the walkway, on its north side (after Roesdahl 1977a: 77; plan by Orla Svendson).

It is clear that the Fyrkat camp's population included women as well as men, and that a broad range of domestic activities and craftsworking went on there. We find these people in the small cemetery that lay on the flat end of the peninsula north-east of the enclosure (Fig. 3.26). The cemetery was arranged around a 38 m-long raised wooden platform, perhaps a kind of road or a processional way, built of transverse planks laid on joists supported by earth-fast posts. The functions of this platform are unclear – it is unique in the Viking world – but it was clearly linked to the guiding principles behind the construction of the main enclosure as it ran exactly parallel to the main east–west axial street. Around 30 graves were laid out parallel with the platform on both sides.

The grave of interest here – numbered 4 by the excavators – was found on the north side of the platform, nearer its narrower, eastern end (the grave is published in Roesdahl 1977a: 83–104, with additional notes throughout; three decades later another study appeared, with more extensive scientific analyses and some startling new information, Pentz *et al.* 2009; the account given below draws on both publications; see also Gardeła 2016: 73f; Fig. 3.27).

A rectangular cut had been excavated in the loose sand which forms the sub-soil of the cemetery, and was then carefully lined with a thin layer of clay. Into this had been laid the wooden body of a wagon, used as a 'coffin' for the body of a woman (Figs 3.28–3.30). With her in the wagon were grave-goods of various kinds, discussed below.

The wagon-body was clinker-built of seven overlapping oak planks, fastened with nails and rivets. It was 2.0 × 1.0 m in size, 0.45 m deep, and had been laid in the grave on its removable chassis of oak cross-beams – the whole cradle being lifted from the wagon and deposited in the grave. The eastern end of the wagon body, by the feet of the dead, was certainly present as it can be seen in profile on the excavation photos, but it is not certain whether the west end was intact or left open (see Peter Wagner's reconstruction of its carpentry in Roesdahl 1977a: 84–90, and the alternative interpretation in Pentz *et al.* 2009: 229; Fig. 3.31).


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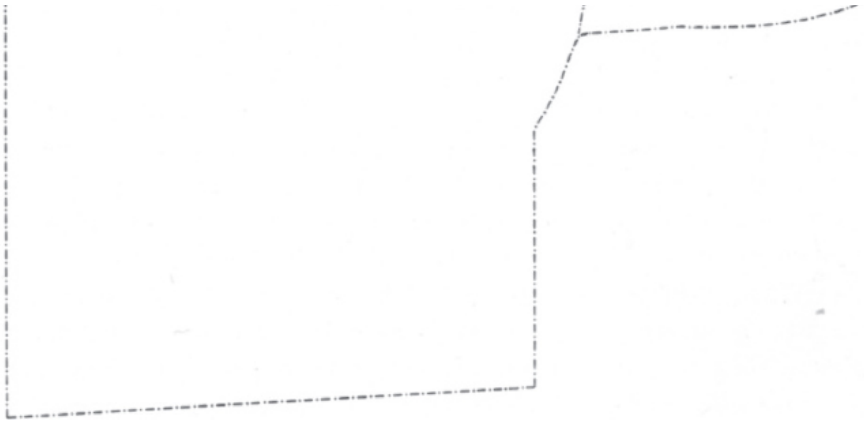


Fig. 3.28 Plan of grave 4 at Fyrkat. The rivets and iron fittings of the wagon-body can be clearly seen, shown in black; the linear hatched areas indicate the remains of the wooden cradle on which the wagon-body rested. On the south side of the grave are the two possible postholes, which may represent some kind of burial marker. Very few skeletal remains survived, but the approximate position of the woman's body could be made out as stains in the soil, here shown by the fine dotted lines; she was laid in the grave with her head to the west. The numbering refers to the catalogue of grave-goods (after Roesdahl 1977a: 86; plan by Orla Svendson).



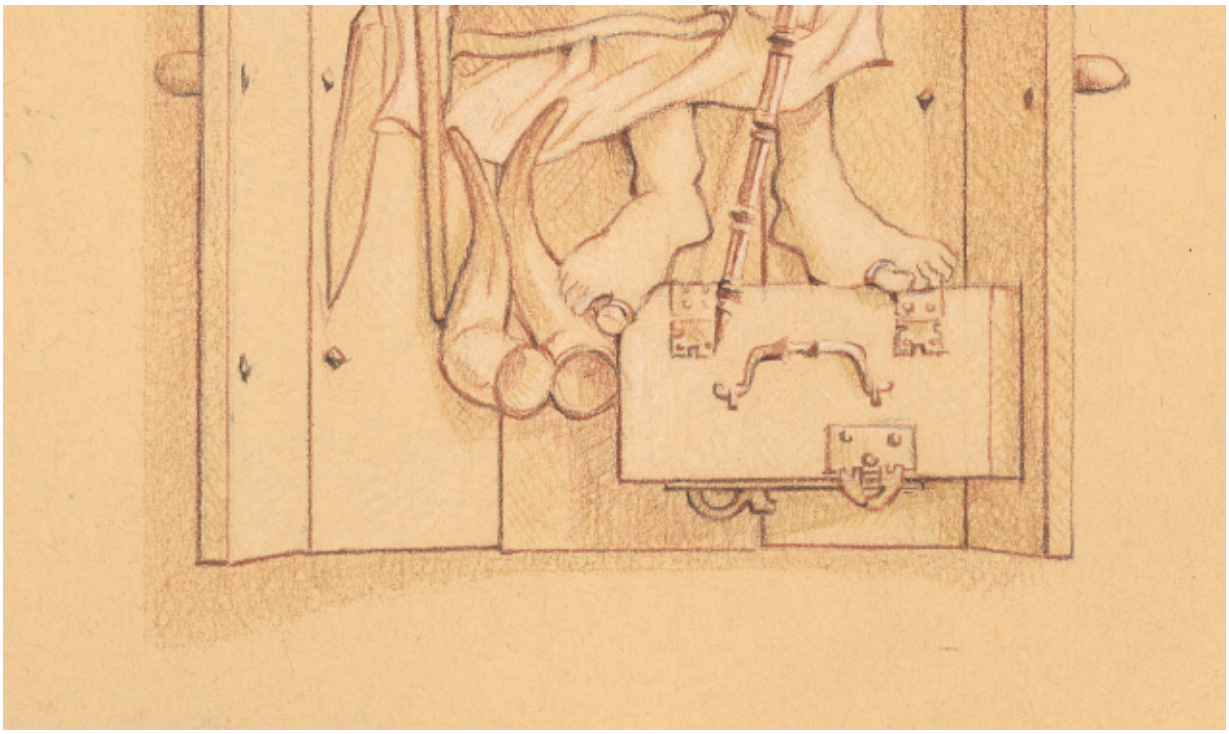


Fig. 3.30 An alternative reconstruction of grave 4 at Fyrkat as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Thomas Hjejle Bredsdorff). It is not certain whether or not gable ends were present on the wagon body.

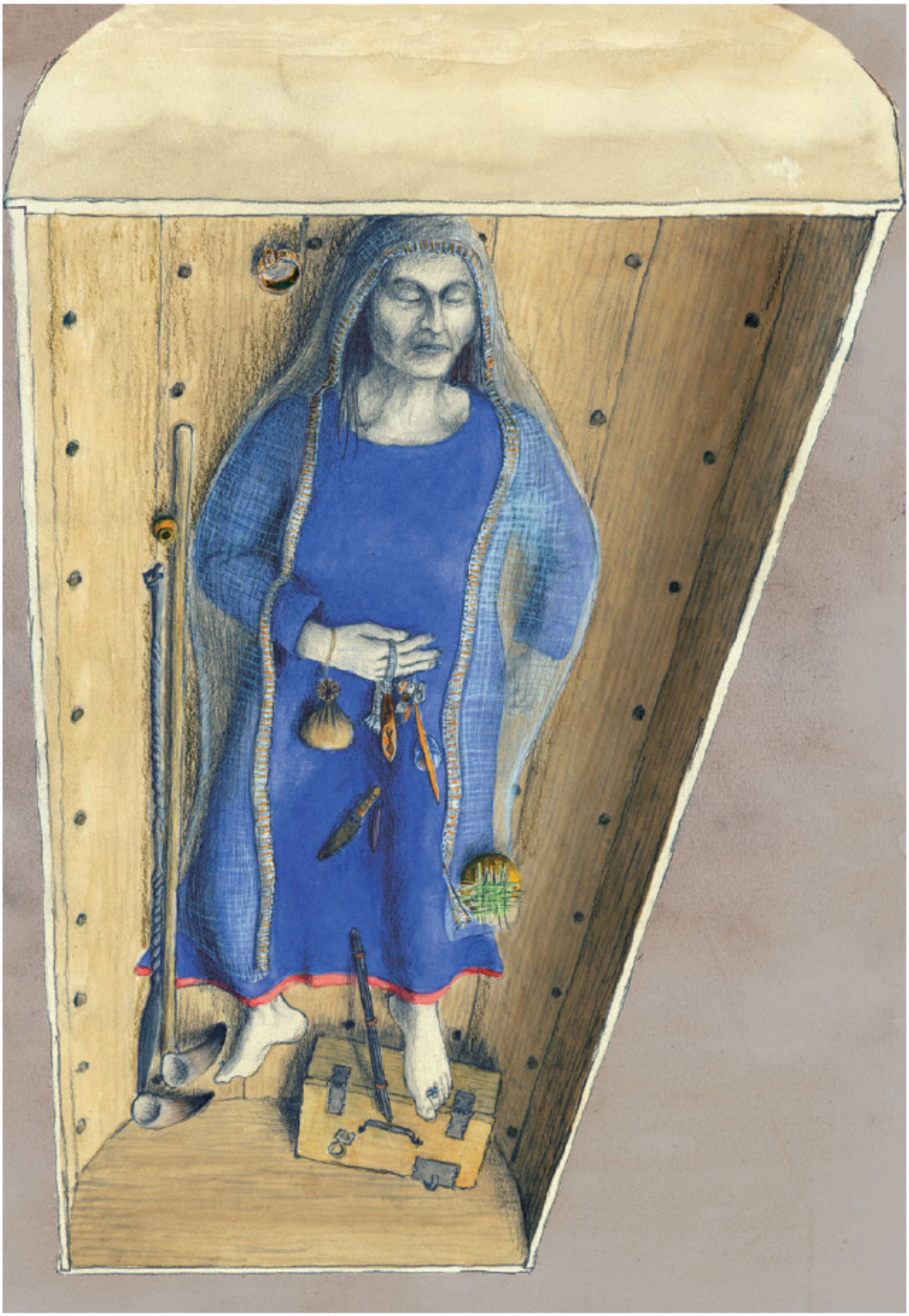


Fig. 3.29 A reconstruction of grave 4 at Fyrkat as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson). It is not certain whether or not gable ends were present on the wagon body.

The use of a wagon-body for burial in this way is known from a number of Viking-Age cemeteries, including one more example from Fyrkat itself. There are fourteen examples from Denmark and northern Germany, of which eleven are female burials and the rest are of undetermined sex; all available datings are from the tenth century (Roesdahl 1978: 11; see also Hägg 2009 for a deeper time perspective on the burial custom). The rite was less common in Sweden, where one such burial is known from Birka (grave Bj. 1131 – Gräslund 1980: 24). Sometimes wagons were included among the grave-goods, though not used as the container for the body. The classic example is of course the wagon from the Oseberg ship burial (Brøgger & Shetelig 1928: 3–33, and see below). This is the only one to have survived intact, and was richly carved, but we have no way of knowing if this was also the case for that from Fyrkat. Most of the excavated examples are of similar size to that from Fyrkat. Their mortuary connection with women of status is confirmed by their appearance in several scenes on the Oseberg tapestry, and on Gotlandic picture stones from Alskog and Levide (Lindqvist 1941: Figs 135f, 176, 178; 1942: 12–15, 96). Þórgunnur Snædal (2010) has explored these images in more detail in a ground-breaking paper, and observed that even the contours of certain Gotlandic pictorial monuments to women resemble the outline of wagons, and argues that the wagon burial rite – whether carved in stone or enacted in fact – is a female equivalent to the Valholl journey for dead male warriors.



Fig. 3.31 Photograph of grave 4 at Fyrkat under excavation in 1955, seen from the west. The end-board of the wagon-body in which the woman was

buried can be seen at the top of the picture (after Roesdahl 1977a: 85; photo by Svend Søndergaard).

The woman in grave 4 was laid out on her back in an extended position, probably with a pillow of some kind to support her head. Her left arm was by her side, but the right arm was flexed inwards across her waist. The bone preservation was too poor for any age determination to be made, but she would have stood about 1.70 m tall.

As one of the best-preserved of the possible '*volva* graves' from Scandinavia, it is instructive to examine the disposition of the burial in some detail. It should be noted that when the burial was excavated in the 1950s standards of record-keeping left something to be desired, and a number of grave-goods were not precisely located on the plans.

She was dressed in a blue costume of very good quality, with red details and ornamentation in gold thread across the chest area. This was exceptional clothing in many respects, not least as none of the jewellery fittings and brooches which held the standard Viking-Age female dress together were present. It seems to have conformed to the very latest fashions of the 980s, and probably comprised a foot-length gown with long, sweeping arms. Several objects were found in a position that might suggest that they hung from a belt, but no trace of a buckle or belt mounts was found. The writers of the report considered that, like some of the others buried at Fyrkat, she may have been interred in a shroud (Roesdahl 1977a: 190), but the new analysis of 2009 suggested that this was instead a full-body veil of linen, so thin as to be transparent – another item of then-current high-end fashion.



Fig. 3.32 Replicas of the two silver toe-rings worn by the woman in grave 4 at Fyrkat (photo by Neil Price).



Fig. 3.33 A small bronze bowl, possibly from the Middle East or Central Asia, buried in grave 4 at Fyrkat (photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark).

The Fyrkat woman was also wearing items of jewellery which are completely unique from a Viking-Age context: two silver toe-rings (Fig. 3.32). The rings were identical and probably made as a pair, each one 1.5 cm in diameter and unadorned. Fastened with a clasp fitting, they were probably worn on the second toe. The closest parallels come from the Far East (Pentz *et al.* 2009: 222). In view of the rings, which were probably intended to be seen, it is possible that the woman was buried barefoot or in open-toed sandals.

Resting up against the woman's left knee was a small bronze bowl, 10 cm in diameter, for which the closest parallels come from the Middle East and

Central Asia, particularly from Persian Khourasan (Fig. 3.33). It seems to have travelled a long way to Fyrkat, and interestingly has a close parallel with the Klinta grave discussed above. The Fyrkat example contained a fatty substance, perhaps an ointment of some kind, covered over with a ‘lid’ of woven grass that perhaps acted as a kind of filter.



Fig. 3.34 A damaged box brooch of Gotlandic type, found in grave 4 at Fyrkat where it was used as a container for a white lead substance, provisionally interpreted as body paint (photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark).

By her right elbow was a small copper bowl, only 3.8 cm high, with no known parallels – perhaps it was a drinking cup? Slightly to the right of the woman’s head lay a gilded bronze box-brooch with silver and niello decoration (Fig. 3.34). Probably imported from Gotland, the brooch was very heavily

worn, and was placed in the grave upside down. On close analysis for the 2009 paper, it was revealed that it had been used as a container for a white lead paste, interpreted as some form of make-up, of a deeply unhealthy kind used since Roman times. We cannot know how this was used or where it was applied, but it is a startling image to think of the Fyrkat woman with a blank white face resembling the impression given by the cosmetics of Japanese geisha. Even more surprising is the find made in 2017 at another circular fortress, at Borgring near Køge, of a tiny fragment that appears to come from the same box brooch (Persson 2017). If correct, aside from the extraordinary coincidence of discovery, it would imply that the Fyrkat woman had also visited another fortress, which might have interesting implications for her activities there.

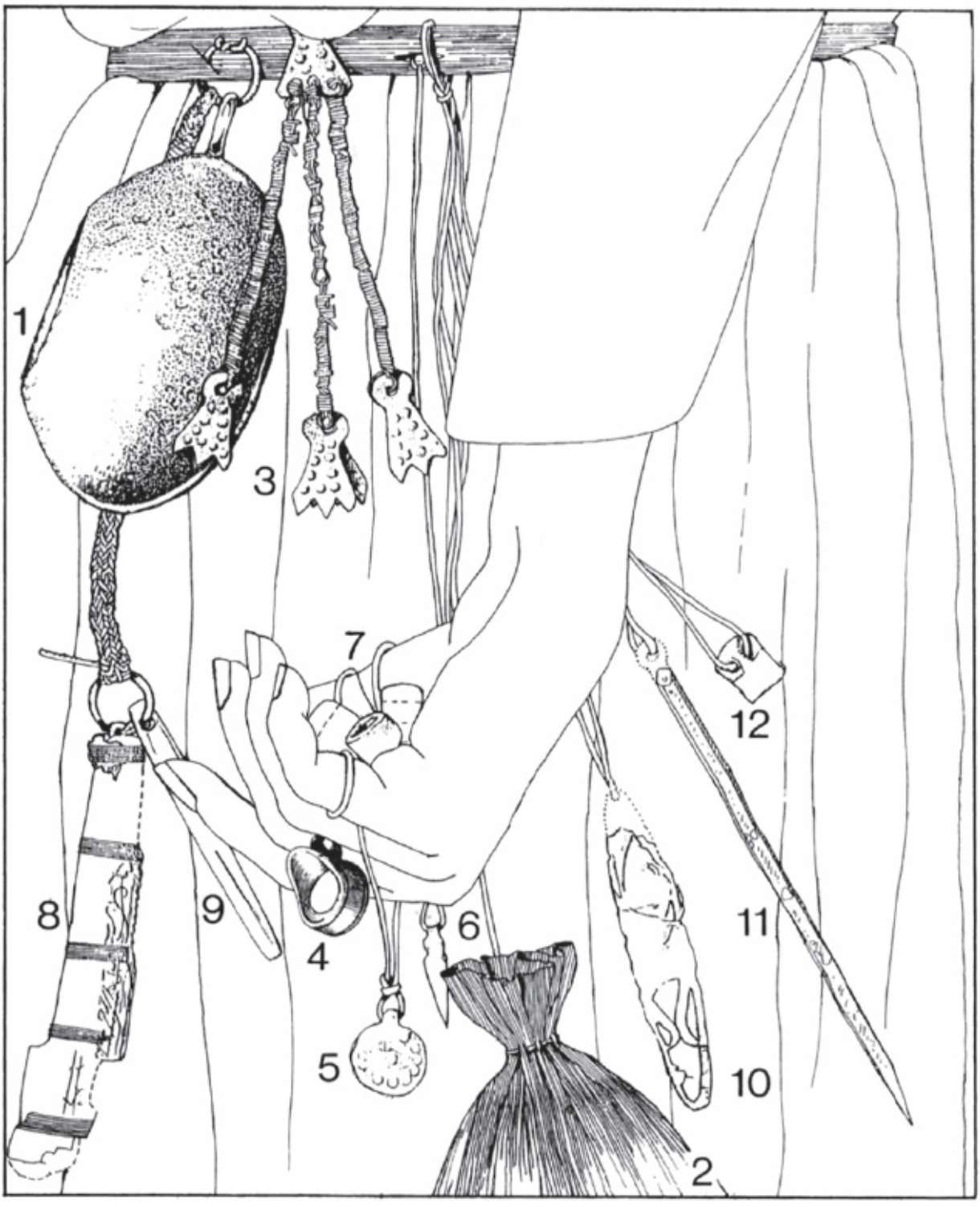


Fig. 3.35 Hayo Vierck's reconstruction of the items buried with the woman from grave 4 at Fyrkat, in which the various loose grave-goods are seen as originally part of a complicated belt ensemble (after Vierck 2002: 45).

In her lap the woman had a sheathed knife, its hilt bound in five loops of silver wire. Grouped around this were a number of other objects, including an 8 cm-long whetstone of dark slate. Most of the artefacts in this group seem to have been either jewellery or 'amulets' of different kinds. A small, very finely plaited silver chain was found, with a thread running through it, possibly in association with a small silver ring. Clustered nearby, perhaps once attached to the chain or to a string that had decayed, were a round silver pendant and a few fragments of silver that may have once been something similar. In the same group were found a dress pin of copper alloy covered with gold foil, an ornamented pendant in gold, and two glass beads. A silver pendant with three suspended 'bird's feet' decorations was also found here; this object resembles finds from the Finnish mainland, but more particularly further to the east in Russia – it has clearly been imported, and only one other example is known from Denmark, from the famous Mammen grave that seems to have been of princely status (Iversen 1991).

Another item found in the same group, and possibly strung on the same string or chain, is important in the context of *seiðr* and the *volur*. This was a small silver pendant in the form of a chair, of a kind found in other female graves with possible links to the practice of sorcery. The object is considered in detail below. Hayo Vierck (2002: 45; Fig. 3.35) has suggested that this chair was originally suspended from a belt, together with all the objects in the woman's lap and several other items such as the bronze bowl by her side. As we shall see in chapter 4, such an arrangement would find very good parallels among the belts of Sámi sorcerers, and seems convincing.

A scatter of clear glass fragments covered an area of approximately 15 cm^2 alongside the above cluster of jewellery, and it seems to have been a small, thin-walled ampule. This is not of local manufacture, and was probably imported from Continental Europe or perhaps the Middle East. Analysis indicated that it contained a brilliant white substance made of phosphorus, lead and calcium. Fragments of a sheepskin pouch were also found, probably closed with a string of some kind drawn through a copper bead.

From an unlocalised point somewhere around the knife and jewellery came several hundred seeds of henbane (*Hyoscyamus sp.*). The excavator's notes say merely that they were retrieved here *fra gravens bund*, 'from the bottom of the grave', which can be interpreted several ways (Roesdahl 1977a: 84). They

were found tightly grouped and had probably lain within the sheepskin pouch, becoming dispersed when the latter decayed. Henbane is a plant with mind-altering properties, and this find is discussed further below.

By the woman's feet up against the end-board of the wagon-body was an oak box, at least 24 cm long with highly ornamented tin-plated iron hinges and a complex lock. This chest, which had been repaired several times with patches of poplar, was locked when buried. The bottom of the box seems to have been filled with folded clothes. Their exact appearance is impossible to reconstruct but the finds included items of very good quality, with similar decorative details to the woman's funerary dress. A fragment of leather with what seems to be relief embroidery in gold and silver thread may have come from an apron or a hood, while a number of other fragments of gold and silver threads clearly adorned other clothing items. The box also contained pieces of gold thread decorating blue and red woollen fragments, and loose silver thread. An iron hook of the hook-and-eye kind was also found in the box, and presumably served as a fastener on an item of clothing. Taken together with what the deceased was wearing, this makes up a wardrobe of very high status indeed.

On top of the textiles in the box lay a pair of shears in a finely-made poplar case, a slate whetstone 20.5 cm long, and a spindle-whorl of burnt clay. In or on top of the chest were two more items of possible 'magical' association: the lower jawbone of a young pig, and a clump of pellets which appear to have been quite old when placed in the grave, suggesting that they had been carried around for a long time. The latter are particularly interesting: once thought to be pellets from an owl, on later CT-examination they were shown to be rolled conglomerates of hair and "calcareous material" which could come from bones. Were these the remains of cremations, rolled up into little balls of hair, ash and fat?

Parallel with the woman's right side lay an iron meat-spit, 99 cm long, with a spear-form blade and a twisted shaft. The handle was placed by the woman's elbow, just below the small copper bowl. Lying next to the meat spit and parallel with it was a wooden staff of some kind, entirely perished but visible as negative impressions left in the iron corrosion products on the spit. The staff seems to have been about the thickness of a finger in cross-section, but its length is uncertain. An object so thin is unlikely to have been a walking stick,

but it may have served some domestic purpose. Its use in connection with ritual of some kind cannot be ruled out – as we shall see below, at least one of the different ‘sorcery staffs’ in the sources seems to have been a slim cane.

Two large, undecorated drinking horns, probably from cattle, were also found in the grave but their exact position was not recorded.

In the present context one of the most interesting objects in the grave, besides the henbane, came from the area around the oak box by the woman’s feet. Here the very corroded and fragmented remains of a metal staff were found. The writers of the report did not interpret it as such – and its identification is far from certain – but its location led them to suggest that it was actually *in* the chest. In reconsidering the excavation plans and the object’s possible original form, I would instead argue that one end of it was resting on top of the box, while its length extended along the wagon-body by the woman’s left leg (Fig. 3.36). This object is considered in detail below.

The poor condition of some of the grave-goods is interesting. The box was rather clumsily repaired, and does not seem to have been of good quality. The Gotlandic box-brooch was almost in pieces when placed in the grave. Many of the grave-goods imply eastern connections, and it is possible that the toe-rings also have such associations. As Roesdahl suggests (1977a: 192), either the woman herself or someone she knew seems to have travelled along the Baltic littoral into Gotlandic and Finnish waters, and perhaps also along the Russian river systems.

Most strikingly, the woman in grave 4 was accorded the richest burial of any in the cemetery. We must consider here the virtually certain royal connections of the ‘fortress’, and the fact that many of the men who served there must have belonged to the king’s retinues (and were presumably buried in the cemetery, though weapons were found only in one grave). In this light, it is clear that this woman must have been of very considerable social standing indeed to be honoured in death above all others present. That this was occurring in the late tenth century, within the orbit of a king who claimed to have made the Danes Christian, is more remarkable still.

A number of curious features in connection with the surroundings of grave 4 also suggest that its occupant might have been specially regarded. At the southern edge of the grave-cut, at about the height of the woman’s elbow, were found two circular cuts about 60 cm deep, 20 cm broad, at an angle of

approximately 45 degrees (Fig. 3.37). Filled with charcoal, the cuts seem to represent the remains of posts that had burned. Interpretation is difficult here, but they may have once stood vertically (or even sloping as found) and marked the burial in some way. A small stone-set hearth was also found about a metre away from the posts, again directly south from the grave, but the dating of this feature is unknown and it may well have been prehistoric.

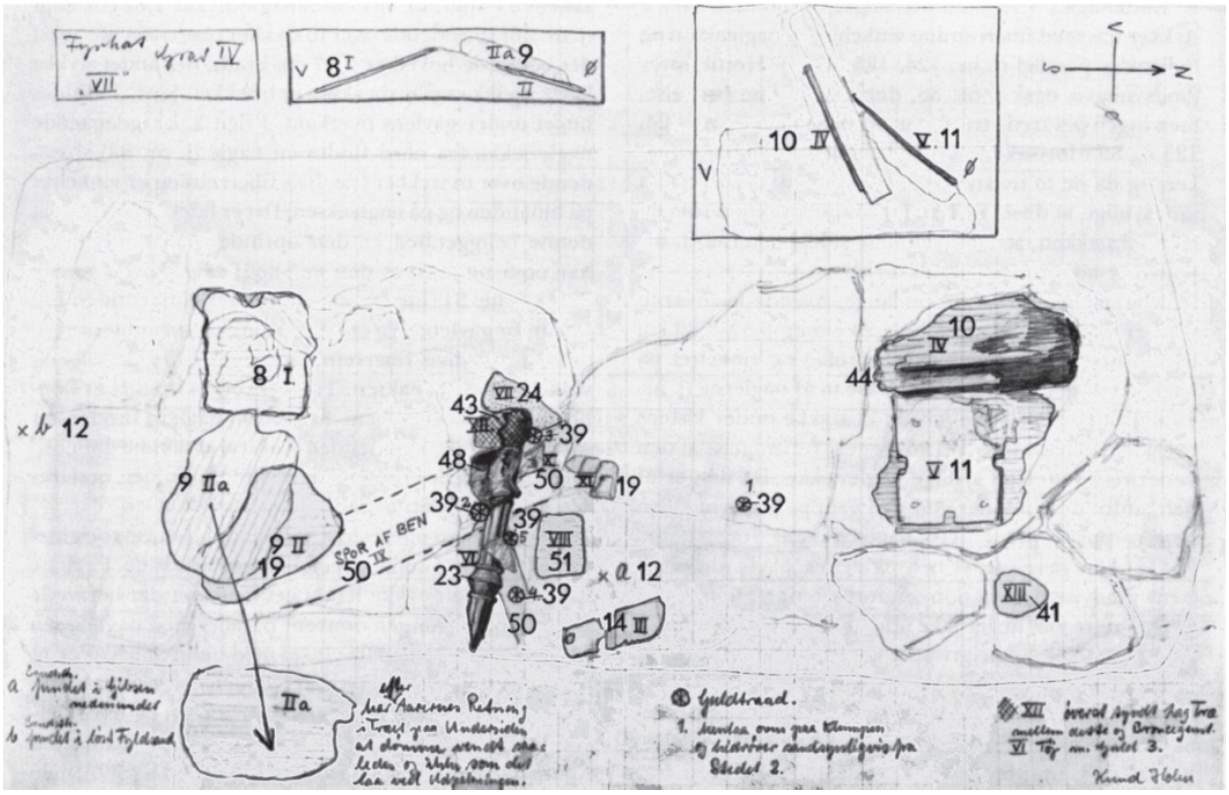


Fig. 3.36 Plan drawing of what remained of the oak chest by the feet of the woman in grave 4 at Fyrkat (marked B & C on the excavation plan), drawn while under excavation in the conservation laboratories. The possible staff of sorcery can be seen in the centre, numbered 23 (after Roesdahl 1977a: 88; plan by Knud Holm).

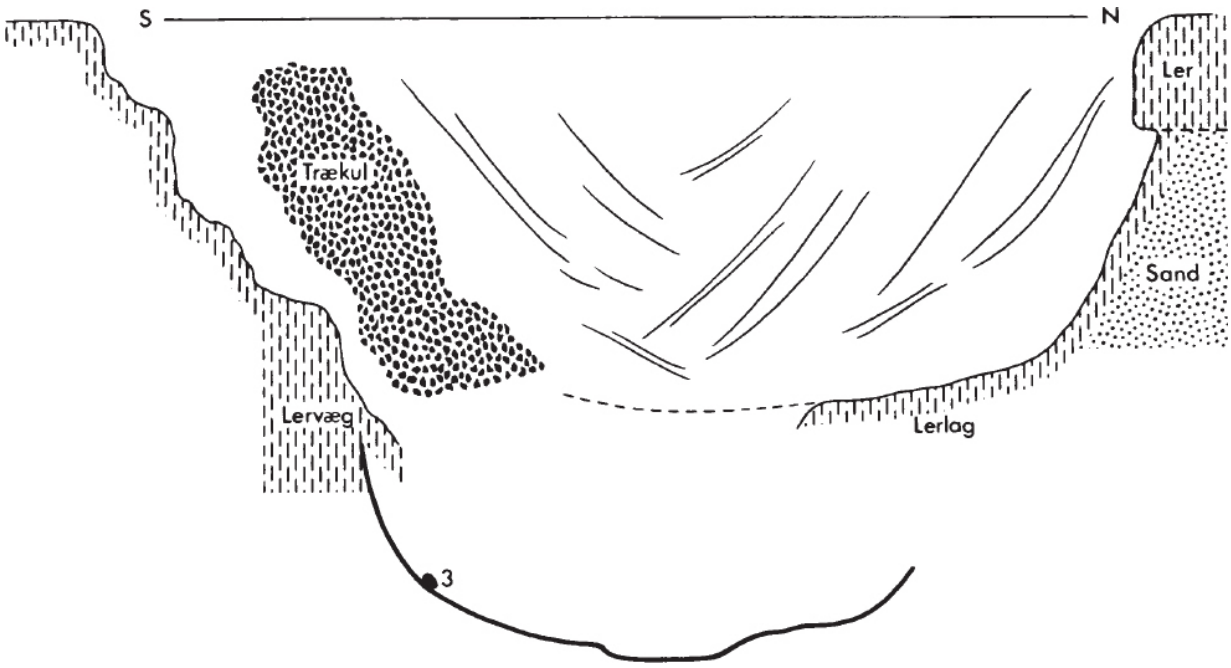


Fig. 3.37 Section drawing through the centre of grave 4 at Fyrkat, showing the profile of the grave cut and one of the sloping burnt ?posts on the southern side (after Roesdahl 1977a: 85; plan by Orla Svendson).

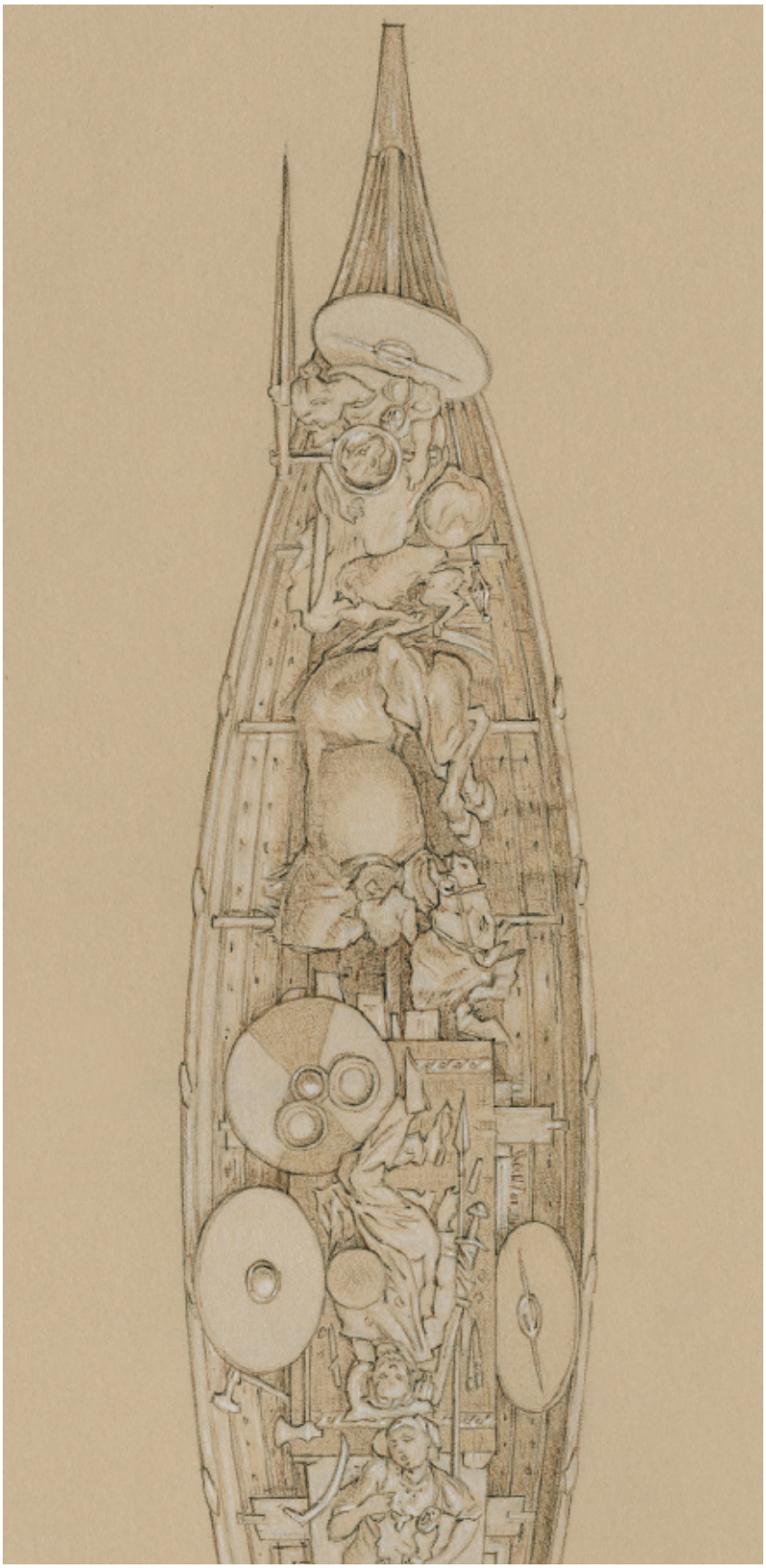
In passing we may note an interesting Anglo-Saxon parallel for the woman in Fyrkat 4, in a sixth-century female inhumation from Bidford-on-Avon in Warwickshire (Dickinson 1993). This woman was also buried with a range of unusual amulets, including a leather object apparently sewn with miniature buckets, a leather bag with various possible ‘charms’ including a puzzling cone of antler, and some remarkable jewellery. The grave is interpreted as that of a ‘cunning woman’ (Dickinson 1993: 53, who also presents a range of parallels).

Boat burial Ka. 294–296 from S. Bikjholberget, Kaupang, Larvik k., Vestfold, Norway

The early trading emporium of Kaupang on the Viksfjord is well known as a key site for the development of Viking-Age urbanism in Norway (see Skre & Stylegar 2004 for a summary of the settlement; Skre 2007 references the full excavation programmes). The main settlement consisted of a bustling community of merchants laid out along the quaysides by the water, but surrounding this were a series of cemeteries on promontories and on the low heights along the edges of the fjord. The grave in question was a multiple

burial so complex that when it was originally excavated in the 1950s it was recorded as four separate features and later published in an extremely fragmented way (Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995: 22–6, 92–5, 99, 103, 115–20, 128–9). Only during the second Kaupang project was it recognised as a single entity, renumbered as Ka. 294–296, and even then discussed only briefly (Stylegar 2007: 95–100, 122–3). The interpretation presented here is my own, that I have developed at greater length elsewhere (Price 2010a, 2012; see also Lihammer 2012: 198f; Pedersen 2014). The Kaupang burial Ka. 294–296 is difficult to disentangle, but rewards the effort as probably the most elaborate possible sorceress burial so far known (Fig. 3.38).

The funerary sequence began in the mid–late ninth century when a man of indeterminate age was buried on his left side, his head to the north-east, probably dressed in a cloak because a penannular brooch was found at his shoulder. He had been interred with his chest pressed up against a large stone, and his body had been covered from the waist down with a cloth of very fine quality, drawn up like a blanket over his legs. With him were a handful of objects: two knives, a fire steel and two flints, a whetstone, some fragments of a soapstone vessel and what the excavators called an “egg-shaped stone”.



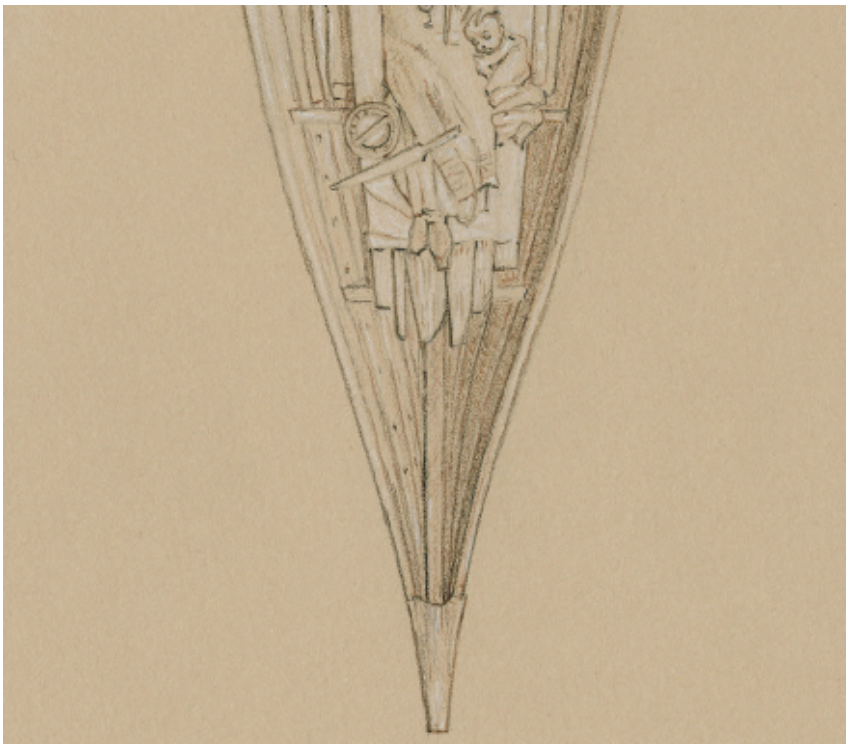


Fig. 3.38 Reconstruction of the multiple boat-grave inhumation Ka. 294–296 at the S. Bikjholberget cemetery, Kaupang, as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

Some unspecified “iron objects”, perhaps tools, were also found. This grave in itself seems unremarkable, but it played an apparently integral role in the sequence of subsequent ritual activity that began several decades later, probably in the early tenth century, when an 8.5 m-long clinker-built boat was placed exactly on top of the dead man. Its keel aligned precisely SW–NE along the axis of his grave (which tells us that its location was remembered). Inside the boat were the bodies of four people, sexed through both osteology and by artefactual association: a male, two females and an infant, together with a number of animals. Around and above the bodies, laid out together with them or deposited above them as the boat was filled with earth, were masses of objects.

In the prow a man and a woman lay apparently on blankets covering the decking. The woman was aged about 45–50 when she died, arranged on her back with her right hand on her breast, ankles crossed and her feet pointing into the prow. Her head was resting on a stone, like a pillow. She was expensively dressed, her clothes held together with two gilded oval brooches

and a trefoil brooch, beads and a silver ring strung between them, a silver bracelet on her arm. From her belt hung a knife and a key. To her immediate right was a bucket. Balanced across her knees, a weaving sword. A baby was wrapped in the woman's dress, bundled at her hip with her left hand resting on its head. Lying head to head with the woman, arranged symmetrically with his feet pointing to the stern, was a man of unknown age. He had been placed slightly twisted, his upper body lying supine while his legs were flexed and bent to one side at the waist. Spatially, though not necessarily personally, associated with him were numerous weapons: two axes of different types, of which one was an antique when it was buried; a throwing spear; a sheathed sword, its point precisely at his head, with two knives and a whetstone next to it; a shield (two more lay nearby); a quiver of arrows implying probably also a bow, now completely decayed. A silver arm-ring lay above him. On his midriff lay an inverted frying pan. On the sword scabbard two spindle whorls had been carefully placed. A pot of German manufacture had been smashed and its pieces scattered over the man's body along with three glass beads, near a soapstone vessel. Two more of the latter were deposited at the man's feet. An iron dog chain was draped next to him, with a sickle somewhere nearby.

Amidships, a bridled horse had been killed and laid on the deck. Its exact manner of death is unknown but its throat was probably cut. Irregularities in the bone assemblage also suggest that the horse was decapitated and roughly dismembered, its limbs and body parts then placed back in approximately their anatomical positions. A single spur was placed on the mangled corpse.

In the stern of the boat was a second woman, apparently buried sitting up, either in a chair or hunched up against the rising end of the vessel. We lack most organics from the grave, but from the woman's location and her seated posture it is possible – even likely – that the steering oar of the boat was resting in her hands. A whetstone and a bridle-bit leant against her feet, which touched the carcass of the horse. She seems to have been well-dressed, her clothes fastened with oval brooches and beads, fragments of textile suggesting high-quality fashion. In addition, she was apparently wearing some clothing item made of leather, very unusual apparel indeed. Behind her was a shield. To her right, resting on the deck, another enigmatic 'egg-shaped stone" and a weaving sword of iron. Somewhere near her (the exact location is unknown) was an axe. In the woman's lap was an imported Insular bowl of bronze that

had been scratched with runes, *i muntlauku*, ‘in the hand basin’. The bowl contained an unidentified object of gilt copper alloy fixed with iron nails, a copper alloy ring that might have been used to suspend the bowl, a ‘tweezer-like’ object, and the severed head of a dog. Its body lay crossways over the woman’s feet. One pair of its legs, perhaps detached, lay a little below the torso; the other legs were missing. Marks on the bones suggest crude carving of the flesh before the ragged skeleton was reassembled. Around the woman were also found fragments of wood and bark, pieces of sheet iron and objects of copper alloy; we do not know what they were.

To the woman’s left, an iron staff had been pinned down under a large rock. It is now preserved to a length of 0.65 m, with an expanded ‘handle’ with three rods, each with a ring attached (Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 72ff, 2016: 63–6, 312f). The shaft is broken in the centre, but it is hard to say if this was an ritual act or the result of taphonomic processes.

The four people in the boat, the horse and the dog were probably not alone. The excavation records are incomplete here but it looks as though there were other animals too. Several loose “animal teeth” were recorded, scattered around the body of the woman in the prow. The whole burial was then covered with earth and complex stone constructions, building up to a low mound. The excavators also found patches of cremated bone and wood mixed here and there in the deposit, hinting at further rituals about which we know nothing.

The Kaupang grave raises many questions. Were the man and woman a couple, with their child? Or were they unrelated? Who was the woman sitting in the stern, apparently some kind of sorceress? Did they all die together, either violently or through illness? Was one or more of them killed to accompany the others in death? Whose were the boat and the animals, or did they belong to none of the dead? What do all the objects mean, and would a contemporary understanding of them even approximate to our own? What connection did all of this have with the man under the keel?

The ‘Gausel Queen’, Hetland sogn, Rogaland, Norway

The grave known as the ‘Gausel Queen’ has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, as one of the most spectacular Viking-Age inhumations from Norway (Bakka 1993; Børsheim 1997; Børsheim & Soltvedt 2002). Lying within a high-status cemetery that included several boat burials, this slab-lined cist burial under a mound contained no preserved human bones though a body

seems originally to have been present, artefactually sexed as female on the basis of numerous items of very good quality jewellery and dress accessories. The grave also contained three drinking horns, a number of metal vessels, sundry household items (knives, a chain, shears, a frying pan, etc), a wooden chest, a fragmentary shafted lamp with parallels from Oseberg (both material and pictorial), pieces of an Irish reliquary and a penannular brooch. A severed and bridled horse's head lay at the feet of the deceased, in a ritual 'motif' that links the burial with others in the cemetery (Price 2010a, 2012; Fig. 3.39). Alongside the presumed woman's body lay an iron staff, now heavily corroded and fragmented, preserved to a length of 0.7 m. Gardeła (2016: 55f, 77) strongly contests my suggestion that the object preserves remains of a basket-like 'handle' construction, but I disagree, in that to me the (admittedly highly damaged) remains of such can clearly be seen. The burial has been much discussed in its landscape context, in terms of its international connections, and also in relation to my own interpretations (*e.g.* Sørheim 2011, 2014). The burial is dated to the second half of the ninth century (ÅFNF 1833: 75; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 114ff, 2016: 74–8,292f).

Oseberg on the Oslofjord, Vestfold, Norway

Without doubt the most impressive of the possible sorceress graves is the ship burial from Oseberg on the Oslofjord, dated to *c.*834 on dendrochronological evidence. The find is well-known as the richest single burial from the Viking Age ever found, and its quality is such that a possible '*volva*' theme can at best be considered as only one of the many different roles and associations that the women interred there must have played (an obvious point is that the burial contained two women, and we have little idea of their relationship). Only specific points will be taken up here, and the main burial will not be described in any detail (see the early report volumes for more information: Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917a on the excavation and the ship, and 1917b on the art and ornamentation; Brøgger & Shetelig 1928 on the finds; Brøgger & Shetelig 1927 on the plant remains and animal bones; Christensen *et al.* 1992 provides a modern synthesis).

Assuming that one of the two buried females was the 'primary' occupant – which is far from certain – this person has been considered variously as a Viking queen (Åsa is the most commonly cited candidate), priestess or

monumentally rich landowner. The grave also contained several objects that can arguably be associated with the practice of sorcery. The late Anne Stine Ingstad published two perceptive studies of this (1992b; 1995), arguing that the burial was so spectacular that it implies a status for one of the dead woman even higher than that of a queen – a kind of royal intermediary between the worlds on behalf of her people. She bases her arguments on two groups of objects:

- the two small tapestries, each measuring 1–1.5 m in length and 0.16–0.23 m wide, which seem to have hung from the rafters of the burial chamber
- the contents of the iron-studded oak chest (nr. 149) found unopened in the burial chamber

Ingstad provides a detailed interpretation of the processional scenes on the tapestries as relating to the worship of Freyja and Óðinn, with themes of sexual power and fertility, and sacrifice for future prosperity (1995: 140–3). The symbols of the two deities run as a consistent motif through the images on the weaves, with spears and ravens for Óðinn and a variety of female figures who appear to be representing aspects of Freyja's nature. The tapestries include scenes of hanging men in a tree, in the classic mode of Óðinnic sacrifice, surrounded by images of women who seem to be pacing beneath the tree holding raised swords, and with hands lifted in a gesture resembling prayer (Fig. 3.40). Fragments of the same textiles also show armed men apparently wearing animal skins, and curious figures that seem to show women with the heads of birds and boars (see below). All these themes of sexuality, violence and transformation combine in the practice of sorcery, but in the Oseberg grave the consistently impressive status of its practitioners is raised to a new level – the buried woman appearing as perhaps the ultimate '*volva*' figure at the highest stratum of royal power. Even the place-name attached to the burial mound supports this, as it seems that Oseberg means 'Hill of the *Æ*sir', implying cultic functions for the locality (Ingstad 1995: 139).

More recent work has expanded upon this, demonstrating not only the extraordinary complexity of the grave construction and its accompanying rituals (Gansum 2004; Price 2008a, 2010a, 2012, 2014b; Gardeła 2016: 66–73), but also the enigmatic nature of the women interred within, at least one of

whom seems to have had pathological conditions such as to give her an appearance far from the ordinary (Holck 2006).

That the Oseberg tapestries were based on a perception of reality rather than myth is supported by other finds from the grave, particularly the wagon and other forms of transport such as the sleds and of course the ship itself. The backboard of the wagon was in fact decorated with a carved frieze full of what appear to be cats, the sacred animal of Freyja (Fig. 3.41). As with Þorbiorg's catskin gloves discussed above, here again we see a link to the Vanir deities in a sacred context. The iron-studded chest also contained a number of artefacts specifically depicted on the textiles, such as two iron lamps of the kind borne by women at the front of the tapestries' procession, and most importantly a possible staff of sorcery. The grave chamber also contained seeds of cannabis, which like the staff are discussed in more detail below. Along with the magnificent array of clearly symbolic objects such as the animal-head posts, the burial effectively provided the material requisites for the enaction of the scenes in the tapestries' ritual dramas (to this should be added Gunhild Røthe's 1994 reinterpretation of Oseberg in a cultic context, and Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh's detailed analysis of the grave-goods' disposition from a ritual perspective, 1998: 227–38).





Fig. 3.39 Reconstruction of the so-called 'Queen' burial, from Gausel, Rogaland, Norway (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

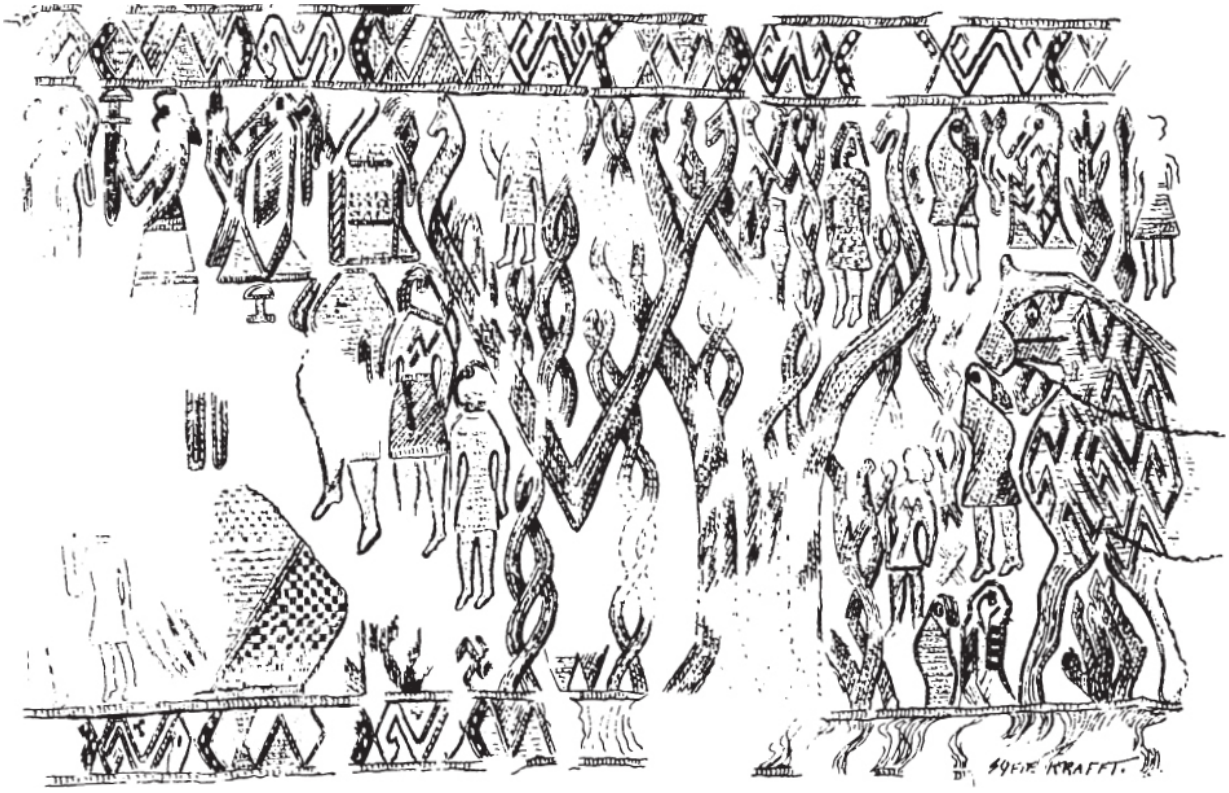


Fig. 3.40 The tree with hanging bodies depicted on the Oseberg tapestry; note the female figures in the top left (after Ingstad 1992b: 242; drawing by Sofie Krafft).



Fig. 3.41 The rear body-panel of the carved wagon from Oseberg, showing the design of cats – a symbol of Freyja? (Photo by Annie Delbéra, Creative Commons).

Peel Castle, St. Patrick's Isle, Isle of Man

Another grave to be considered in this context contains one of only five finds of possible staffs of sorcery from outside Fenno-Scandia and Iceland. On the west coast of the Isle of Man, at Peel Castle on St. Patrick's Isle is the only female burial of probable Norse origin so far known from the island. The grave was found in a small cemetery which included five other clothed burials, though whether or not these were pagan is hard to discern (Holgate 1987; Batey 1994: 157ff; Freke 2002: 66–9, 83–7; Wilson 2008: 48–50; Gardeła 2014a: 33–6, 2016: 346). The woman was buried in a slab-lined grave with a very costly selection of grave-goods, making it in fact one of the richest female burials known from the British Isles at this period (Figs 3.42, 3.43). She was laid out on her back in an extended position, wearing a spectacular necklace of 71 glass, amber and jet beads; more of the latter were also found loose in the grave, though perhaps they had been sewn onto her clothes, about which we

otherwise know nothing. On her chest was a work-bag made of some organic material, containing two needles. A pair of household shears and a comb hung from a tablet-woven belt, which seems to have been decorated by two amber beads and a fossil ammonite. Also with her in the grave were several knives, one of which had a handle inlaid with silver.

Along the woman's right side parallel with her leg had been laid an iron staff, 0.85 m long, the exact details of which are hard to discern as it was poorly preserved. The end nearest the woman's waist, and perhaps held in her right hand, tapers considerably, implying some kind of 'handle'. Interpreted by the excavator as a cooking spit, the staff clearly resembles those discussed here in the context of sorcery (*contra* Wilson 2008: 49), and this interpretation is strengthened by other objects in the grave. Next to the staff were deposited charred grains of wheat and barley, and the wing of a goose, and the fossil may also be seen in this light. All these finds bring to mind the 'charms' of the woman from Fyrkat, as does the richness of the burial and its context surrounded by male graves. It is clear that the woman from Peel was of considerable standing in her community, though where exactly she came from is unclear. The absence of brooches suggests that she was not buried in conventional Norse dress, and it has been suggested that she may have been an Anglo-Scandinavian from the Danelaw (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 111).

We know that St. Patrick's Isle was a major Norse power centre on the Isle of Man in the Viking Age (*ibid*). Whatever her actual origins, the cemetery itself leaves no doubt that the woman from Peel Castle was buried in a Viking context, with non-Christian burial rites. Here again, this may be the burial of a *volva* or similar sorceress. The grave cannot be closely dated, but is probably from the mid-tenth century.

Confluences

One curious aspect of these graves is the confluences between them, beyond obvious common features like the staffs. In ways that are suggestive but which are hard to understand, several artefacts of unusual character occur repeatedly in these burials. For example, the iron chain in the woman's grave at Klinta was of the same kind as that holding the bodies on the chair in the Birka double-grave Bj. 834; the bronze oriental jug from Klinta can be compared with a very similar example from Aska; both Klinta and Fyrkat 4 contained

what appear to be Samanid bowls; the studded iron box from Birka Bj. 845 is paralleled in the Oseberg grave, and so on. We cannot discuss this in terms of a '*seiðr*-box' or 'magical' jugs and chains, but perhaps they were in some way instrumental in the rituals that these women may have performed.

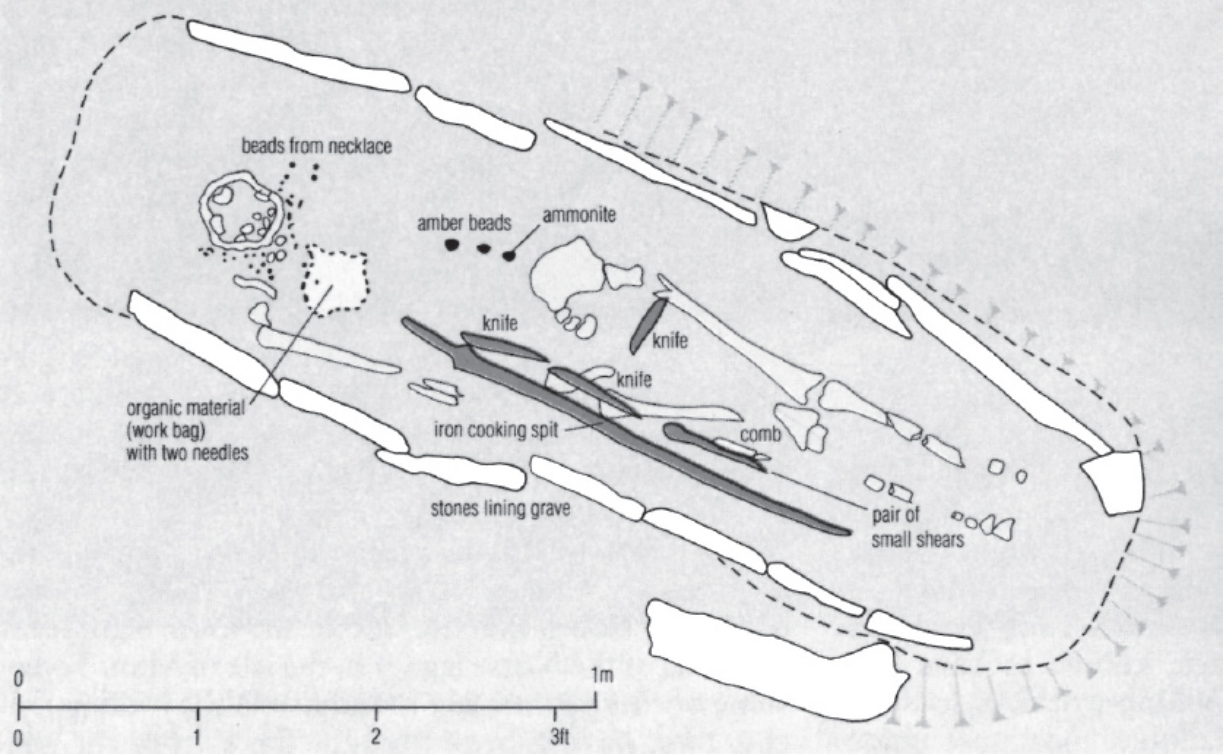


Fig. 3.42 Plan of the so-called 'Pagan Lady' burial from Peel Castle, Isle of Man. The iron staff is marked as a 'cooking spit' (after Batey 1994: 158).





Fig. 3.43 Reconstruction of the so-called 'Pagan Lady' burial from Peel castle, Isle of Man (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).

It is these to which we shall next turn our attention.

The performance

'*Seiðr*' functioned as both verb and noun in a way impossible to render elegantly into English. The general verbs *seiða* and *síða* bely the fact that there were at least six specific ways to describe the performance of the rituals. These have been collected by Strömbäck (1935: 108ff), and are summarised below.

Each verb means essentially ‘to perform *seiðr*’, but in my translations I have tried to approximate their specific connotations:

Verb	*Suggested meaning*	*Sources*
afla at seið	‘to accomplish *seiðr*’	*Sogubrot af fornkonungum*
efla seið	‘to raise *seiðr*’	*Egils saga Skalla-Gríms-sonar; Friðþjófs saga hins frækna; Gongu-Hrólfs saga; Orvar-Odds saga*
efna seið	‘to prepare *seiðr*’	*Vatnsdæla saga*
fremia seið	‘to practise *seiðr*’	*Ynglinga saga; Eiríks saga rauða; Gongu-Hrólfs saga*
magna seið	‘to work *seiðr*’ (connotations of strength?)	*Egils saga Skalla-Gríms-sonar; Gísla saga Súrs-sonar*; *Diplomatarium Islandicum* II: 604
seiða seið	‘to *“seið” seiðr*’	*Gísla saga Súrssonar; Þiðriks saga af Bern*

The performance of *seiðr* was clearly nuanced, but in its practical vocabulary it is hard to find more exact information as to the form that this took.

In almost every published discussion of *seiðr*, the account of the performance in *Eiríks saga rauða* unsurprisingly occupies a central place. However, here again we must be cautious in how we evaluate the sources, and must remember that the description of the Greenland *volva* is contained in a prose passage from the early thirteenth century – quite simply we cannot take all the details contained in *Eiríks saga* as either accurate or authentic (see Strömbäck’s general discussion in *Sejd*, 1935: 54–60 and also North 1991: 157, who argues that the entire passage was invented using Christian ecclesiastical references; see also Tolley 1995a: 62). However, the passage equally preserves *some* early information, a fact confirmed by comparisons with the belief systems of the circumpolar area of the kind undertaken by Strömbäck, Ohlmarks and others discussed above. The process of source-criticism must equally be applied to the other written descriptions of *seiðr*. Some are clearly more reliable than others – Strömbäck (1935: 66), for example, considered that the *Laxdæla saga* performances were particularly trustworthy and free from stereotype.

Each element in the sources must be evaluated individually, and set against the collective resource of information about *seiðr* gleaned from the whole

corpus of material under discussion – a process necessary for each such mention of the practice from a context later than the Viking Age itself.

We can here consider the different aspects of the rituals in turn.

Ritual architecture and space

The seiðhjallr

The primary architectural requisite of *seiðr* was a special platform, usually termed the *seiðhjallr*, on which the performer(s) climbed to carry out the ritual.

The classic example comes of course from *Eiríks saga rauða* (4), when the *volva* Þorbiorg climbs onto a *seiðhjallr* to begin her chanting. The same is seen in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3) when Heiðr also sits on a high platform. In chapter 33 of the same saga, the sorceress Skuld sits on a *seiðhjallr*, inside a black tent which appears to be set up on top of the platform. In this instance, the platform is actually built on a battlefield, from which Skuld directs a complex sorcerous attack on Hrólfr and his army (see chapter 6).

Sometimes more than one person used a platform, as in *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* when two *seiðkonur* (also called *trollkonur* and *flagð*) sit on a *seiðhjallr*, which seems to be raised some distance above the ground because both women break their backs when they fall from it.

It is clear that male sorcerers also used platforms, as with the *seiðhjallr* built by the evil *seiðskratti* Þórgrímr in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (18). In *Laxdæla saga* (35), the *seiðmaðr* Kotkell sets up a *seiðhjall mikinn*, 'a large *seiðhjallr*', onto which he and his three sons climb to work their sorcery. Another example of such a structure large enough to support a number of individuals comes from *Gongu-Hrólfs saga* (28), where no less than twelve male sorcerers sit upon it; the platform is constructed inside a building, and is described as being raised high up, on four posts.

The *seiðhjallr* has on several occasions been seen as synonymous with the *hásæti* or 'high seat' that formed a place of honour in the Germanic hall, and also with the *þulr*'s chair in *Hávamál* 11. In one source, the twelfth-century poem *Sólarljóð* (51), the 'chair of the *nornir*' is implied as a seat of sorcery; this is discussed below. Olrik was probably the first to make the high-seat connection in 1909 (8f), and it has been followed by most commentators on *seiðr* since then – Strömbäck is a notable exception (cf. Holmqvist 1962). The idea can partly be explained by the connotations of a high vantage point from

which to see further, in every sense, than would otherwise be possible. This link is however hard to understand for several reasons not least that in the one account when both a high seat and a *seiðhjallr* are mentioned (*Eiríks saga rauða*) they are clearly separate things. Most of the descriptions imply some kind of fairly substantial structure, and in any case one that had to be 'prepared' rather than merely brought out in the case of a high seat. In *Laxdæla saga*, Kotkell is specifically said to have constructed (*lét…gera*) his great platform.

Another variant of the platform-as-chair idea has connected the *seiðhjallr* with Hliðskjálf, the throne of Óðinn mentioned in the prose introductions to the *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*. From this chair the god has a supernatural view *um heima alla*, 'over all the worlds', a vista that he shares with others such as Frigg and Freyr. At times they sit in the chair alone, and at times together with Óðinn. Vilhelm Kiil (1960) has made a convincing case for seeing this as something similar to the *seiðhjallr*, or even as its divine equivalent.

We have seen in the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* above how Turges's wife used to give her answers from the altar at Clonmacnoise, and presumably this functioned in the same way as the *seiðr* platforms of various kinds. The text does not say whether Ota stood or sat on the altar, but her choice of it clearly implies a requirement for something raised some way above the ground, not simply an impressive chair or similar. It may also be significant that the altar was itself a sacred object, and stood in a sacred building. Perhaps this may be related to the socio-spatial context of the *seiðr* platforms set up in the 'temple-halls' of the chieftains visited by the *volur* in the sagas?

In a final possible parallel, Strömbäck (1935: 116) noted the passage from the medieval English text *Gesta Herwardi*, when William the Conqueror is assisted by a sorceress who sits high up to cast her spells against his enemies, and who breaks her neck when her charms are unsuccessful and she falls. No further details are given, but the similarity of Old Norse descriptions of falls from the *seiðhjallr*, and the 'post-Viking' context of the Normans whom the sorceress helps, are enough for us to wonder if this is also a faint echo of a *seiðr* performance.

Chair-pendants

No *seiðr*-platform has ever been excavated in a Viking-Age building, or at least it has never been recognised as such (though Bäck *et al.* 2008 argue for a possible example at Lilla Ullevi). From the saga accounts it is clear that these constructions were either specially built for each occasion – and therefore dismantled afterwards – or else a permanent feature of the hall was temporarily adapted for this use. In neither instance would any special archaeological trace be found.

However, a small handful of objects have been excavated which bring such associations to mind, namely the chair-pendants mentioned in the section on possible *volur* graves above. The chairs have been discussed by Arrhenius (1961: 140f, 149, 156ff), Roesdahl (1977a: 140f), and Duczko in the context of the granulated ornament (1985: 69f). They are found in silver, bronze and amber, and all range between 1 and 3 cm in size.

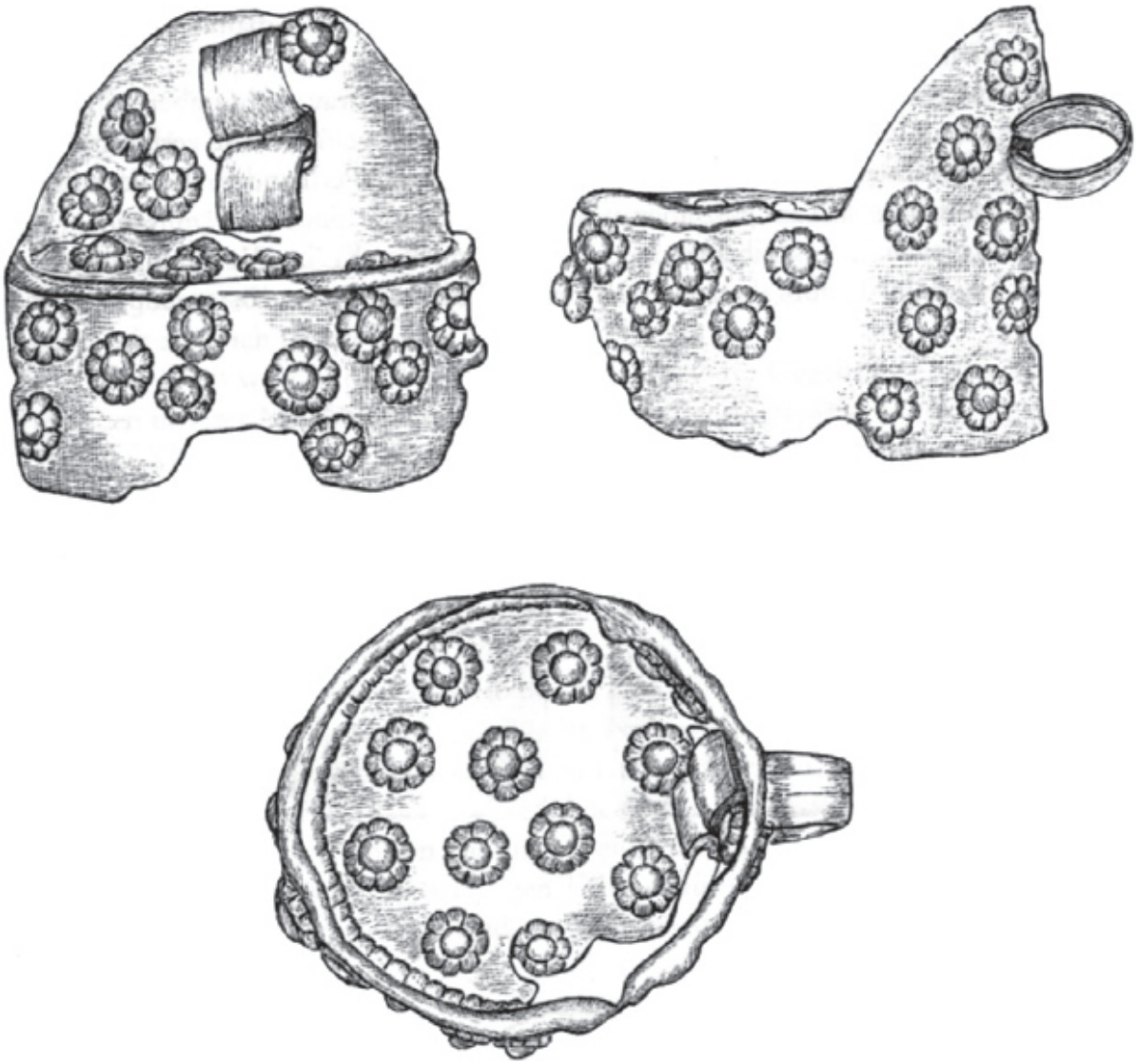


Fig. 3.44 The silver miniature chair from Birka grave Bj. 632 (after Drescher & Hauck 1982: 251; drawing by H. Lange).

Three examples have been found in graves from Birka. One was recovered from grave Bj. 632, an assumed female inhumation in a chamber, in which the woman was buried with an elaborate necklace of carnelian and rock crystal beads, from which hung several pendants – among them a silver miniature chair (Arbman 1940: pl. 119, 92; 1943: 210–3; Figs 3.44, 3.45). Another silver chair, much more simply made, was found in Bj. 844, again a probable female inhumation; its position within the grave was uncertain (Arbman 1940: pl. 92; 1943: 317ff; Fig. 3.46). Both graves Bj. 632 and 844 also included pendants of coiled snakes. A third silver chair was excavated in Bj. 968, also found on a

necklace worn by a woman in a chamber grave (Arbman 1940: pl. 92; 1943: 394ff; Fig. 3.47). A so-called ‘valkyrie’ figurine and an equal-armed cross were on the same string.

The pendant from Bj. 632 was heavily granulated, with 42 rings with granules around its sides, and a further 11 on the seat (Duczko 1985: 69). Like most of the chairs, there is no sign that it had a base. In contrast to those from Birka graves Bj. 632 and 844, which had a generally low, broad profile, the pendant from Birka grave Bj. 968 is much taller and slimmer in form. This appears to represent a ‘block chair’ (Sw. *kubbstol*), of a kind carved from a single block of wood and thus following the curving contours of the tree trunk, with the back and arm-rests hollowed out above the solid seat.

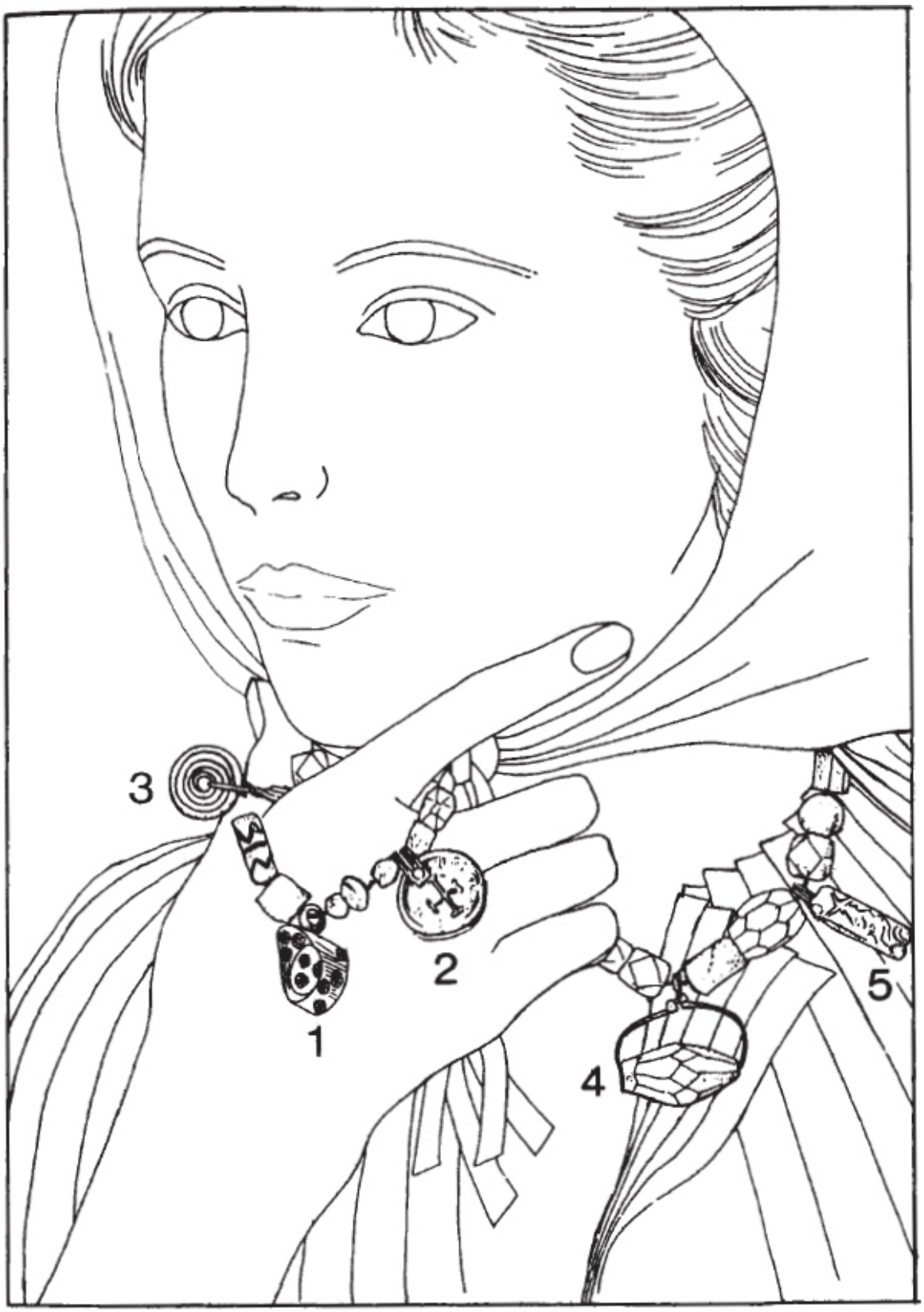

3
2
1
4
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Fig. 3.45 An alternative reconstruction of the necklace from Birka grave Bj. 632 as worn; the miniature chair is shown as number 1 (after Vierck 2002: 45).

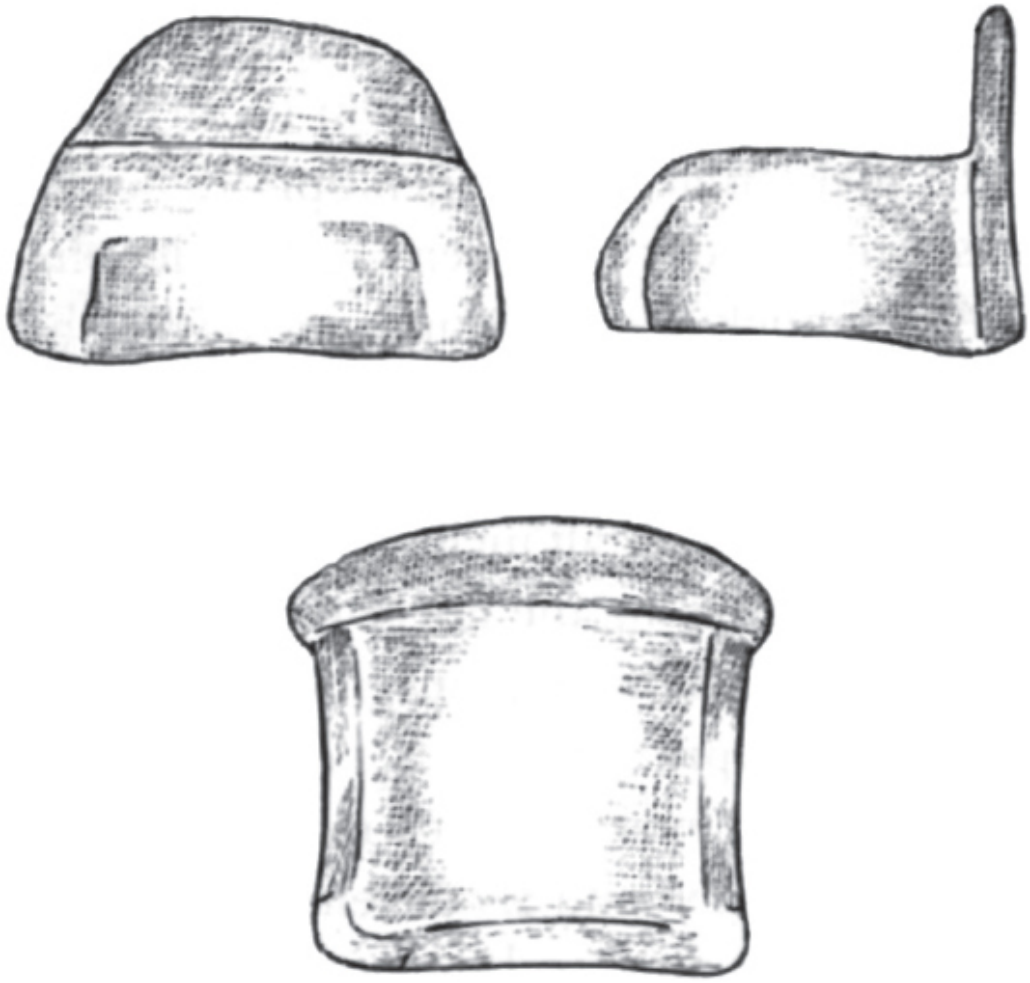


Fig. 3.46 The silver miniature chair from Birka grave Bj. 844 (after Drescher & Hauck 1982: 266; drawing by H. Lange).

The example from grave 4 at Fyrkat, examined above, was 1.3 cm in diameter and also formed as a *kubbstol* (Fig. 3.48). The pendant was finely moulded, with gold inlay in incised lines following the upper and lower edges of the chair. Some kind of gold decoration may also have been applied to the seat, but this is uncertain as the object wasdamaged at this point. A suspension loop on the back of the chair confirms its use as a pendant (Roesdahl 1977a: 101f).



Fig. 3.47 The silver miniature chair from Birka grave Bj. 968 (photo Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

A very small bronze example of the *kubbstol*-type is known from an unprovenanced amulet ring in the collections of the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm (Arrhenius 1961: 141f; Fig. 3.49), on which it is strung together with a bronze horse and a miniature sword and spear. Another, rather crudely made, square bronze chair has been recovered from a tenth-century woman's grave at Folkeslunda on Öland (Drescher & Hauck 1982: 301). Another chair is known in amber, found in an eleventh-century woman's grave at Ihre, in Hellvi parish on Gotland (Stenberger 1961: 134).

An exceptional miniature chair in silver, unique in form and very elaborate, was found in an inhumation grave at Hedeby (Drescher & Hauck 1982: 237–44; Fig. 3.50). The chair is pierced with several holes in the back and seat, and was clearly attached to something – perhaps an amulet ring or some other object. The chair has arms moulded to resemble hounds seen in profile in the manner depicted on runestone images, and the back appears to incorporate two birds (see Vierck 2002: 42–7 for parallels). The positioning of these creatures, posed as if to speak into the ears of the chair's missing occupant, brings Huginn and Muninn irresistibly to mind. With this Óðinnic parallel, the 'hound' arm-rests may well be better interpreted as the god's wolves, Freki and Geri. A silver coin gives the grave a *terminus post quem* of 899–911.



Fig. 3.48 The silver miniature chair-pendant found in grave 4 at Fyrkat (photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark).



Fig. 3.49 A miniature chair strung with other 'charms' on an unprovenanced amulet ring in the collections of the National Museum of Antiquities in Stockholm (after Arrhenius 1961).

The Hedeby example was further illuminated in 2011 with a remarkable discovery of a similar silver chair model at Lejre – the ancient Danish royal power centre. This example is free-standing and resembles the Hedeby piece in the presence of birds and wolves, though with their positions reversed: two wolf-like creatures form the back of the Lejre chair, while two three-dimensional birds sit on the arms of the throne-like seat (Fig. 3.51). What makes the Lejre chair unique is the fact that it is occupied (the birds appear to look directly at the seated figure). Of indeterminate sex, the being is shown wearing what appears to be a long gown with a decorative border, with multiple strands of beads around the neck; this is covered by a cloak or shawl. The figure wears some kind of head covering, perhaps a scarf or cap, and seems to have two neck-rings. The legs and arms are covered but the face is free, with no mouth but a broad, flat nose and two eyes staring straight ahead – one of which has been scored out. The find has been extensively studied (Christensen 2010a–c, 2015: 194–203; Osborn 2015) and has been identified by some scholars as a depiction of Óðinn due to the damaged eye and the possible ravens, arguably seated on Hliðskjálf as he looks out across the worlds. Others have seen the figure instead as Freyja, the mistress of magic, due to what seem to be the unmistakably feminine gender signals encoded in the clothing. The practice of cross-dressing is discussed in relation to sorcery elsewhere in this chapter, and it must be said that the Lejre figure would also fit quite well in this context, and subsequent finds of ambiguously gendered images may potentially be seen in the same light (*e.g.* Feveile 2015). For my part, I think it unwise and unnecessary to attempt specific identifications of the figures, beyond the contextual indications of power and a possibly connection with magic (see Price 2006b for an expansion of this discussion).

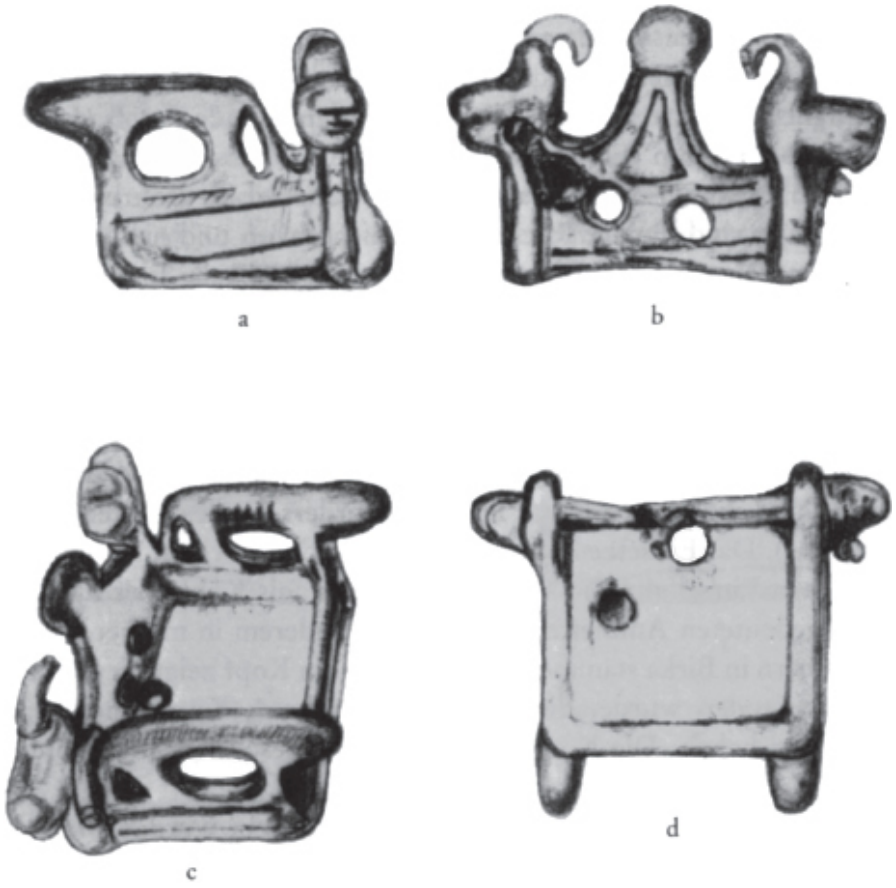


Fig. 3.50 The silver miniature chair from a tenth-century grave at Hedeby; note the wolves or dogs as arm-rests, and the birds on the chair back (after Drescher & Hauck 1982: 239; drawing by H. Drescher).



Fig. 3.51 The enthroned silver figure from Lejre (photo National Museum of Denmark).



Fig. 3.52 The silver miniature chair from the Gravlev hoard, Jylland, deposited after 952 (after Drescher & Hauck 1982: 255; drawing by H. Lange).

A number of chair-pendants have also been found in hoards; their presence in such a context is unexplained. Three examples are known from Danish hoards, from Gravlev (dated after 952; Fig. 3.52), Tolstrup (after 995), and Bornholm (after *c.*1000; see Skovmand 1942: 54, 133). In Sweden, miniature chairs are known from two hoards. The first, from Fölhagen on Gotland and dated to shortly after 1000, contained two filigree-ornamented examples (Stenberger 1947: 21–4, pl. 170; Fig. 3.53), similar to that from Birka Bj. 632, though one is much lower in profile. A superbly preserved miniature chair was also found in a silver hoard from Eketorp in Edsberg parish, Närke, deposited around 960 (Ekelund 1956: 152, 165ff; Arrhenius 1961: 149; Fig. 3.54). Square in form with a rounded back, the chair is decorated with diamond-pattern designs and a circle-and-dot in relief on the seat. Two small holes pierce the front of the chair, and it may be that a figure was once fixed in a sitting position. Fabech (2006: 29) has speculated that the items in the hoard may once have belonged to the inventory of a pre-Christian cult site.

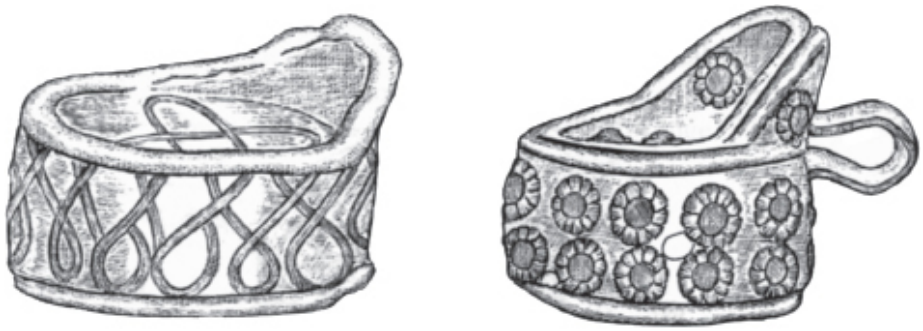


Fig. 3.53 Two miniature chair-pendants from the silver hoard found at Fölhagen on Gotland, dated to shortly after 1000 (after Drescher & Hauck 1982: 256; drawings by H. Lange).



Fig. 3.54 The miniature chair from the silver hoard found at Eketorp in Edsberg parish, Närke, dated to c.960 (after Arrhenius 1961: 149).

With the exception of the Ihre grave on Gotland, all the finds of chair-pendants in burials date to the late ninth and tenth centuries. The hoard finds group slightly later, in the second half of the tenth century and running into the early eleventh. The pendants have a distribution confined to the south and east

of Scandinavia, and are certainly of Nordic manufacture (Stenberger 1958: 200; Roesdahl 1977a: 141).



Fig. 3.55 Two post-medieval kubbstol *from Helsingland, made in a style unchanged since the Viking Age (after Sahlin 1916: 64; photo Nordic Museum, Stockholm).*



Fig. 3.56 The picture-stone from Sanda, Gotland, with figures seated on kubbstolar. *The scene has been interpreted as showing the bringing of sacrifices to Óðinn in Valholl (after Jungner 1930: 68; drawing by Olof Sörling).*

In 1916 Sahlin compared the miniatures to full-size chairs of this type known from early modern times in Scandinavia, and could demonstrate that this form of furniture survived unchanged almost to modern times (Fig. 3.55). The *kubbstol* chair is hard to place in its Viking-Age social context, but it was clearly appropriate to people of rank. At least one chair of exactly this kind is depicted on a picture-stone from Sanda on Gotland (Lindqvist 1941: pl. 177; 1942: 107ff; Fig. 3.56). In the upper part of the stone a man and a woman sit facing each other, apparently inside some kind of building. The woman's *kubbstol* is clearly shown, and she has what appears to be a goose or a swan stretching over her head, its feet remaining outside the structure. Between the two people stands another man holding a spear, which he appears to be exchanging with the sitting man. Below them all is a line of people moving away from what seems to be a sacrificial altar with a burnt offering. The scene with the chairs has been interpreted as depicting Valholl, with Óðinn receiving sacrifices brought up from 'below', perhaps from Miðgarðr (*e.g.* Jungner

1930; Arrhenius 1961: 152ff). The identity of the seated woman is obscure, but the written sources make clear how often the *volur* appear in Óðinn's company.

In the burial finds the chairs are associated exclusively with women, and the presence of these pendants in graves such as that from Fyrkat is suggestive. They may well symbolise high seats of some kind, as distinct from the *seiðr*-platforms as discussed above, or some other 'throne' connected with sorcery and magical power (a suggestion first put forward by Arrhenius 1961: 156ff).

One interpretation would combine the burial contexts, *seiðr* and the gods, namely that the chairs are meant to represent Hliðskjálf, the throne of Óðinn. Thus they would symbolise the view over every world, with a link to the patron of sorcery, while not necessarily being a direct depiction of the kinds of *seiðr*-platforms used by mortal sorcerers. Others have suggested that the chairs represent the seat of Þórr, on the basis of a walrus-ivory figurine from Lund that might depict the god, possibly sitting on a *kubbstol* (Trotzig 1983: 365f); the evidence for this seems weak, as neither god nor chair can be unequivocally identified.

In 1982 Drescher and Hauck published a comprehensive survey of the miniature chairs, setting them in a multi-period context stretching throughout Europe, with the objective of demonstrating that they represent the thrones of gods (a similar line is taken by Vierck, 2002: 42–59). The analogies sometimes combine both chronological and cultural abstraction from the Viking-Age material, which is problematic, but they make a strong case for the supernatural context of the chairs. The suggested link to deities is less secure, with the exception of the Hedeby and Lejre chairs and their possibly Óðinnic theme, and these pieces are unlike any of the others.

Whatever the precise connotations of the miniature chairs, their association with traditional Nordic religion is also strengthened by their total absence from Christian contexts (Roesdahl 1977a: 141). The cross pendant in Birka Bj. 968 can be seen in the same light as the crucifix from the possible *volva* grave Bj. 660 – a symbol of magical power. The occurrence of miniature chairs together with the snake and 'valkyrie' pendants further supports a connection with the supernatural. The grave finds strongly suggest that such chairs were among the symbolic equipment of the *volur* and their kind.

The door-frame

Although not specifically connected with *seiðr*, we may also note the existence of some kind of structure connected with clairvoyance, namely a form of door-frame over which the performer is lifted to 'see' into another world. The famous example of this comes from Ibn Fadlan's eye-witness account of a Rus' ship burial on the Volga:

> It was at the time of the *asr*-prayer [afternoon] on a Friday they brought the servant-girl to something they had made like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and was lifted up to look over the frame, and she spoke with her words and then they lowered her and then they lifted her again and she repeated what she did the first time, and then they lowered her and lifted her the third time and she did again what she had done twice. Then they handed her a hen and she cut its head off and threw it away and she took the hen and placed it on the ship. Then I asked the interpreter about her actions and he said, "She said the first time they lifted her up: 'Look there! I see my father and my mother'; and she said the second time: 'Look there – all my dead relatives are sitting'; and she said the third time: 'I see my master sit in Paradise, and Paradise is beautiful and green, and with him are men and boy-servants; he calls me so lead me to him'."
>
> Ibn Fadlan, *Risāla*: 90; translation after Sass 1995, original text (not given here) after Togan 1939

Vilhelm Kiil (1960: 86ff) has suggested that the 'door-frame' may have actually been a *seiðhjallr*, on which the slave-girl climbed to see into another world. Although superficially appropriate, this interpretation is not supportable from Ibn Fadlan's description alone.

In other respects, this passage and its strange 'door-frame' is often taken to be without parallel in the Old Norse sources, but this is not the case. It is in fact corroborated by a surprisingly little-known strophe from the poem *Volsa þáttr* (see below). After witnessing a fertility ritual involving a horse's phallus, the Christian king Ólafr throws the object away in disgust. Enraged, the woman conducting the ritual utters the following verse, asking the men of the house to:

hefi mik of hjarra	lift me over door hinges
ok of hurðása	and over door-lintels
vita ef ek borgit fæ	to see if I can retrieve
blætinu helga.	the holy sacrifice.

Volsa þáttr str. 13; my translation

Four elements are striking in this description: the context of a sacrifice (and specifically one with strong sexual overtones); the woman being lifted up by

men; the looking out over a door; and the vision of some unspecified ‘otherworldly place’ beyond. All of this bears an astonishingly exact resemblance to Ibn Fadlan’s account, with no possibility that the poem could have been influenced from that direction. This passage is discussed in more detail below, in the context of the poem’s sexual content.

We cannot say for sure what the ‘door-frame’ was, but the combination of Ibn Fadlan and *Volsa þáttr* does indicate that such a construction had a place in the Norse paraphernalia of vision experiences (and not least the poem also confirms that what Ibn Fadlan saw really was a door, rather than this being merely his choice of imagery). Several scholars (Arrhenius 1970; Andrén 1989, 1993a; Eriksen 2015) have discussed Viking door symbolism in terms of points of entry to other worlds, especially those of the dead, and this would again fit well with the two texts. As we shall see in the discussion of *Volsa þáttr* below, there are also good grounds for interpreting the woman in charge of the rituals as something resembling a *volva*, and this again provides another link to the ritual architecture of *seiðr*.

Ritual space – útiseta

In addition to such structures, in the sources for sorcery of a kind clearly-related to *seiðr* we also find a spatial context which was characterised by an *absence* of material props. This concept of *útiseta*, 'sitting out', seems to have represented a kind of nocturnal meditation, bringing wisdom and contact with other realms (Strömbäck 1935: 127–36; Hermann Pálsson 1997: ch. 8). We see this in *Voluspá* 28, quoted in full below: *Ein sat hón uti*, 'alone she sat outside', after which the seeress has gained new knowledge and insight.

The practice is found occasionally in the Old Norse texts, and is again sometimes connected with combat. A classic example, interestingly set by Snorri in a relatively late context, occurs in his *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs* (16). In the year 1161 as King Hákon of Norway prepares for a decisive battle, his foster-mother Gunnhildr commissions a woman called Þórdís skeggja to sit out in order to secure victory. She replies that if the battle is fought at night, then Hákon will win. Similarly in *Orkneyinga saga* (65), of a man close to the Earl of Orkney in the twelfth century it was said that, *hann var forn mjog ok hafði jafnan úti setið*, 'he was keen on the old practices and had spent many a night in the open'.

The same idea appears in Old High German with *hlīodarsazzo*, 'sitting to listen' (cf. Meissner 1917). The person 'sitting out' often did so at a crossroads, or by a gallows under the bodies of the hanged (de Vries 1957: §236). In some way it is clear that *útiseta* relates to Óðinn's ability to talk with the hanged, referred to as we have seen in the twelfth spell in the *Ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál* (157), in *Ynglingsaga* (7) and in several of his names. This must be the same *valgaldr* – the 'corpse-charm' – with which the god raises the dead *volva* to answer his questions at the gates of Niflhel in *Baldrs draumar* (4), and with which Svipdag does the same in *Grógaldr* (1).

Though this was a definite Óðinnic marker, widespread belief in *útiseta* as a mortal practice can be seen as late as the early thirteenth century, when Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson of the Orkneys began his *Jómsvíkingadrápa* thus:

Varkak fróðr und forsum,	I did not become wise under the running water,
fórk aldrigi at goldrum,	I never gave myself to *galdr*,
hefkak	I have never.....
.....	.....
ollunis namk eigi	not at all did I take up

Yggjar feng und hanga the booty of Yggr [Óðinn > poetry] under the hanged

Bjarni Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2; my translation



Fig. 3.57 Reconstruction of the costume of Þorbiorg lítilvolva, based on the description in chapter 4 of Eiríks saga rauða *(drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).*

As well as gaining wisdom and inspiration, *útiseta* has the same sense of summoning something that we will see repeatedly in other parts of the *seiðr*

complex. In the medieval Norwegian Gulaþing laws against pagan practice, this is made concrete when we read that they forbid *útisetu at vekia troll upp, at fremia heiðni með því*, 'sitting out to wake up a troll, to perform heathenism by means of it' (NGL I: 19, 182). Perhaps Þórdís in *Hákonar saga Herðibreiðs* also conjures some being of this kind, and it is this that would fight on Hákon's side to ensure victory (as with Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr in chapter 6).

The clothing of sorcery

In considering the special clothing of the *seiðr*-workers, the obvious starting point is the very detailed description of Þorbiorg lítilvolva's outfit in *Eiríks saga rauða* (Fig. 3.57). This has already been quoted in chapter 2, but we can reiterate here:

107. enn er. hun. kom vm kuelldit ok se madr er i moti henni uar senndr. þa var. hun suo buin at hun. hafdi yfir sier tygla mauttvl blann. ok var settr
108. steinum. allt i skaut ofan hun. hafdi a. haalsi ser gler taulr. hun hafdi. a haufdi lamb skinz kofra suartann ok vid innan kattar skinn huitt staf hafdi hun. i henndi ok var.a. knappr …
110. hun. hafdi vm sik hnioskv linda ok var þar aa skiodu punngr mikill. varduetti hun þar i taufr þau er hun þvrfti til frodleiks at hafva.
111. hun hafdi kalf skinnz sko lodna a. fotum ok i þveingi langa ok sterkliga. latuns knappar. mikler. a enndvnvm.
112. hun hafdi a. haundvm ser katt skinnz glofa. ok uoru hvitir innan ok lodner.

When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue [or 'black'] cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. … Around her waist she had a belt of tinder-wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In it she kept the charms (*taufr*) that she used for her sorcery [*fróðleikr*]. She had hairy calfskin shoes on her feet, with long, sturdy laces; they had great knobs of tin [or 'pewter' or 'brass'] on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves, which were white inside and furry.

Eiríks saga rauða 4; text from Skálholtsbók after Jansson 1944: 39–44; my translation

Some aspects of this clothing – the cloak, the glass beads, possibly the hood – are relatively common elements of Viking-Age female dress. Other aspects of her garb are unique, such as the 'stones' with which the cloak is set. There are no parallels for this in the archaeological material or the saga sources, and one is tempted to suggest a medieval invention here, suitable for a story-book

magician. Many aspects of this description must surely be treated with caution, and not taken as a pattern for the 'outfit' of the *volur*, even were we to assume that they had any form of standardised dress.

However, some aspects of the clothing have definite parallels, and must be taken more seriously. The 'straps' on the cloak are puzzling, and these recall the numerous such features found on the jackets of Siberian shamans. The focus on the special belt also recalls other traditions, such as those of the Sámi; again, we shall examine these in the next chapter. The metals may also be important. In the description of Þorbiorg's shoes, the knobs on the ends of her laces are made of *latún*, which is variously translated as 'tin', 'pewter' or even 'brass' – we simply cannot be sure which of these metals was intended.

Other descriptions of sorcerers' clothing are very sparse in the sagas. The *volva* in *Laxdæla saga* (76) is wearing a woven cloak when she appears in a dream, and when her grave is opened it is found to contain a brooch or pendant. The *spákona* Þórdís in *Vatnsdæla saga* (44) also wears a black cloak, which appears to be more than functional clothing because she instructs a man to wear it when he uses her staff to bewitch an opponent.

Amongst the archaeological material we may think of the silver toe-rings worn by the woman from Fyrkat, and the possible nose-ring found in Birka grave Bj. 660. The silver-embroidered head-bands found in Bj. 660 and 845 may also be relevant in this context, though these are also found in other female graves.

The seated woman on the relief pendant from Aska in Hagebyhöga in Östergötland, who as we have seen may represent a *volva*, wears two or three layers of long garments with a quadruple row of beads and a large bow-brooch of pre-Viking type (see Arrhenius 2001: 306). Around her temples she bears a thin band, perhaps similar to those found in the Birka graves.

Masks, veils and head-coverings

The Old Norse written sources contain almost no direct references to the use of masks or other head coverings in connection with sorcery, but there are a striking number of implicit descriptions of such items. In addition, there is a wealth of evidence from archaeological material.

In the Eddic poems, as we have seen above there is a consistent motif of Óðinn in disguise, reflected in the god's names. Of these, his aliases as Grímr

and Grímnir – ‘Mask’ and ‘Masked One’ – in the *Grímnismál* are particularly suggestive, especially as he appears to enter some kind of trance in this poem. Similarly, the dead *volva* who appears in a dream to Herdís Bollisdóttir in *Laxdæla saga* (76) is wearing a cloth that covers her head like a hood (*faldin hofuðdúki*). In this context we can recall the possible veil accompanying the woman buried in Fyrkat grave 4 (Pentz *et al.* 2009: 218f).

We can also consider the famous episode from *Íslendingabók*, in which Ari recounts the decision by which Iceland accepted Christianity. He describes how the *alþing* met to debate the new religion, and the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr ljósvetningagoði covered himself with a cloak for a day and a night in order to meditate before announcing his recommendations to adopt the new faith. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has studied this episode at great length (1978), and concludes that Þorgeirr is communing with the spirits in a ritual act, bordering on a shamanic trance.

In the archaeological sources we have a number of indications of Viking-Age masks, but none of them are unequivocally associated with religion. The most dramatic are two examples found rolled up and used as caulking in a tenth-century ship from the harbour at Hedeby in Denmark (Hägg 1984a: 69–72, 185–8; 1984b; 2001).

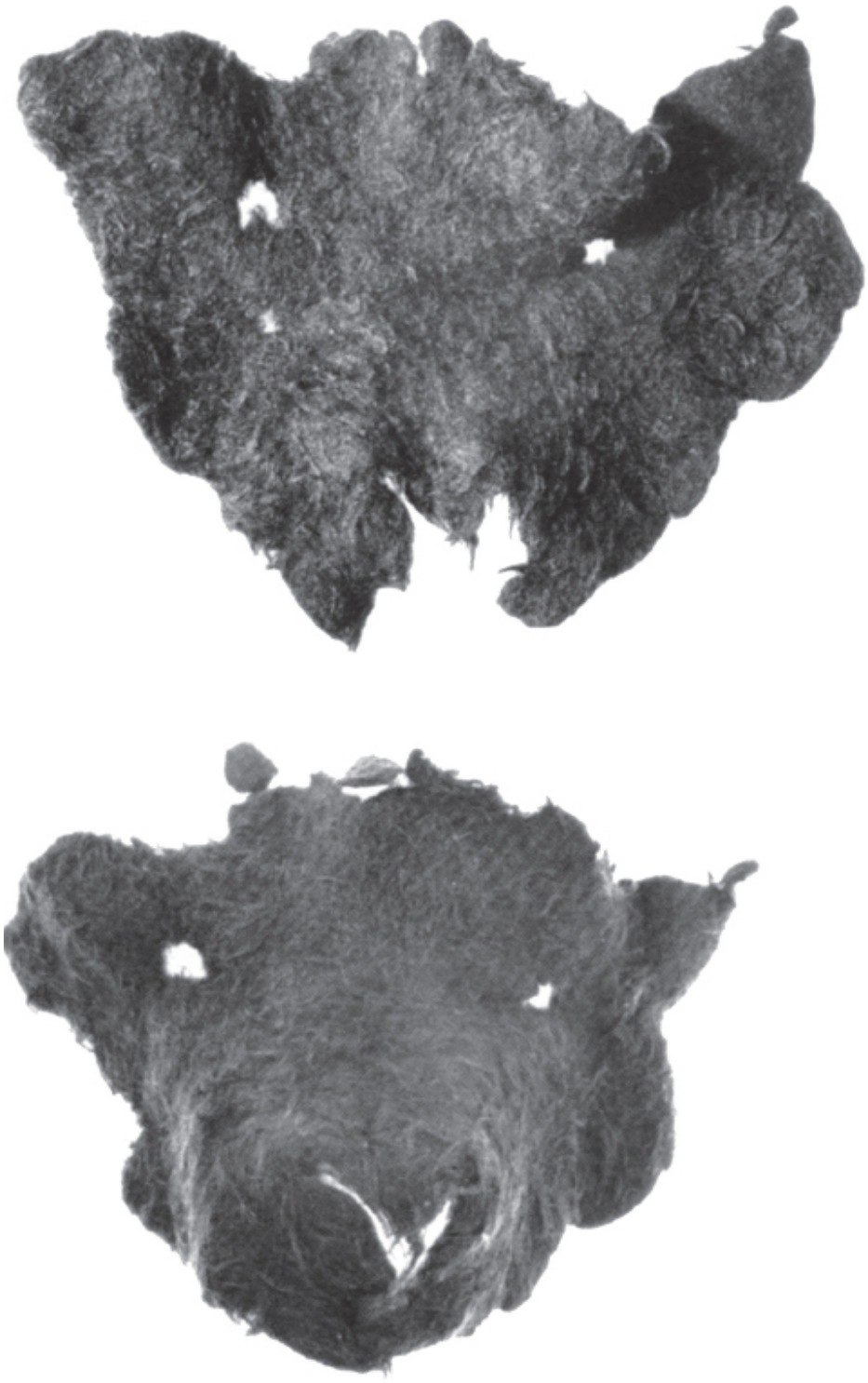


Fig. 3.58 The complete felt mask from Hedeby, Fragment 14D, seen flat in the upper picture and also moulded into what is believed to be its original shape (after Hägg 1984a: 71; photo by E. Tams).

The smaller mask, Fragment 14D in the Hedeby textile database, was made of red felt, and measured only 19 × 14 cm in size (Fig. 3.58). If intended for an adult, only the area of the face itself could have been covered, or it may have fitted an adolescent. The mask had pointed ears, a marked elongated snout, eye-holes and sculpted contours for nostrils. The outer surface of the felt had been brushed up to give an appearance of fur. It is difficult to say which animal is represented – dog, sheep or fox have all been suggested.

Of the other mask, Fragment 25, only half was preserved, but as this was one side of the complete object its original form could be reconstructed (Figs 3.59, 3.60). Unlike the smaller mask, this was of a size suitable for an adult, being 26 × 20 cm wide and therefore twice as big when new. Made of dark brown twill, the mask has been suggested to have depicted a bull or cow, and was originally formed with a flat snout, elongated eyes and clearly defined, pointed ears.

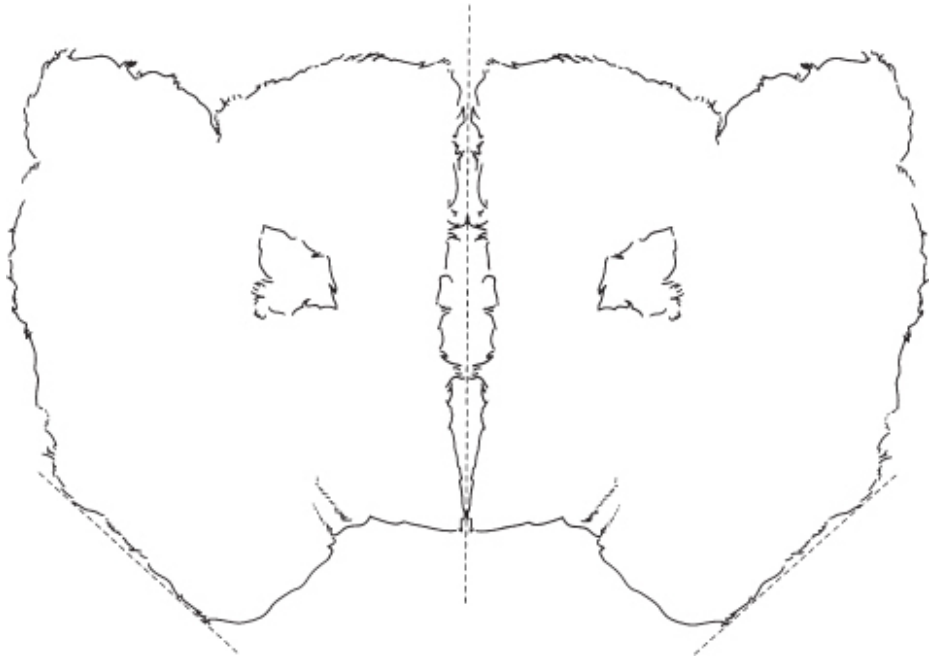


Fig. 3.59 The more incomplete of the felt masks from Hedeby, Fragment 25, preserved to half its original form; the mask is seen here as a doubled image in an attempt to reconstruct the complete appearance (after Hägg 1984a: 70; drawing by H-J. Mocka).



Fig. 3.60 Reconstruction of the incomplete Hedeby mask, Fragment 25 (after Hägg 1984a: 70; drawing by H-J. Mocka).

It may originally have been part of a hood that enclosed the entire head, perhaps fixed at the front so the mask itself could be lifted aside or removed.

In her publications on the Hedeby masks, Inga Hägg has made a comprehensive survey of references to masking traditions, and suggests that they might best be seen in the context of the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, though she also mentions the Óðinnic Grímr-names.

The Hedeby masks bear interesting comparison with a number of similar pieces found at Novgorod, on the Volkhov river in northwest Russia. At least a dozen masks have been found at various sites around the city, all made of leather and preserved in the anaerobic, waterlogged soils. No full publication has been made of these finds, but of the dozen or so discovered a few have been studied in some detail. The excavators have dated all these objects to the thirteenth century on stratigraphic grounds, but these datings must be treated with some caution in view of the methodologies used when the excavations were carried out.

All the published masks are cut from a single piece of leather, and average around 25 cm long by 20–24 cm wide, large enough to cover an adult face. The eyes and mouth are cut out, and the nose is usually formed as a three-sided flap which would cover the wearer's own nose and project slightly, rather like the nose-guard of a helmet (see the examples in Perepelkina 1985: 30f). The mouths are often smiling, and with teeth individually cut out of the leather. Some of the masks also preserve traces of paint, either accentuating the eyes, radiating out from the mouth, or sometimes in coloured circles at different points on the face. Another example, made like the others but with clearly formed ears cut in profile at the top of the mask, was found at Novgorod in the early 1990s and published by Rybina (1992: 181f). This has been dated to the late twelfth century, perhaps as late as the beginning of the thirteenth. The use of the Novgorod masks is unknown, though they were clearly not toys. Their sheer quantity is very striking, and they presumably related to some public performances in the early medieval town (perhaps, as we have seen, even as early as the end of the Viking Age).

Two strange figures on the Oseberg tapestry may also depict women wearing masks, but they may alternatively represent shape-shifters in animal form. Identified as female by the classic sweeping dress characteristic of women in Nordic iconography, one of these shows a figure with a beaked head like a bird, perhaps a crane (Fig. 3.61). She has either a folded shawl or perhaps a pair of wings wrapped about her. The other figure is shown wearing what appears to be the skin of a boar, with a clearly depicted head and bristles running down the back of its neck all the way to the ground (Fig. 3.62). This latter figure is holding a shield aloft (see Hougen 1940: 103ff; Mannering 2017: ch.6).

Looking at other aspects of Viking-Age material culture, a motif that appears with some frequency in the metalwork and occasionally on runic stones is an elongated, kite-shaped human head often termed a 'face-mask' (Fig. 3.63). The motif reached its zenith of refinement in the Mammen style, but examples are known from much earlier artistic traditions. The image is found on various forms of jewellery including pendants and necklaces, on some of which the 'masks' are formed as individual silver and bronze pendants strung together. The most lavish example is the early eleventh-century hoard from Fölhagen on Gotland, which we have already encountered

above as it contained two miniature chairs. The hoard also included 13 mask-pendants, of which one was designed in a mix of Scandinavian and Slavic styles (Stenberger 1947: 21–4, pl. 170; Jansson 1996: 52ff).

Other such images appear on some of the Gokstad and Oseberg woodwork, on a bone sword-pommel from Sigtuna, and in the decorative schemes of the Cammin and Bamberg caskets amongst others. The face-masks also occur on a number of runestones, particularly in Denmark, of which the clearest example is probably the image on runestone DR 66 from Aarhus (Fig. 3.64). The full corpus of motifs has been assembled by Floderus (1945) and Arwidsson (1963), with a useful discussion by Ramskou (1975).

Several writers, including Dragsholt (1961) and Ramskou (1975: 151f), have suggested that the face-masks represent originals in leather. The interlace is taken to indicate a complex series of folds that would allow the mask to be flexibly fitted to the face (Dragsholt's paper includes a number of patterns drawn out from the Viking-Age designs).

The problem with these images in the present context is that while they may represent genuine masks, they may equally have been intended as nothing more than faces. We must be careful here not to let the terminology of art historical analysis spill over into interpretations of actual objects. Similarly, the archaeologically-excavated masks tell us little of the circumstances in which they were used. While they appear unlikely to have been toys, they may have been employed in seasonal dances and festivals of the kind familiar from later medieval Europe, rather than used by sorcerers in the course of magical practices. We shall return to this subject of masking and guising in chapter 6, reviewing the important work undertaken in this area by Gunnell, Hutton, Cawte, Back Danielsson and others. Several other archaeological artefacts are also discussed there in the section on the *berserkir*, including Russian frescoes of masked warriors, the evidence of the Migration Period helmet plaques, runestone imagery and other depictions of masked fighting men.

Drums, tub-lids and shields

We must also consider the possible Norse use of another object that in fact forms one of the primary attributes of shamans across the circumpolar region – the drum.

In the textual sources there is one single incident in which such an instrument may be mentioned – the passage from *Lokasenna* 24 in which Óðinn is accused by Lóki of practising *seiðr*. The god is said to have *draptu á vétt sem volor*, ‘tapped on a *vétt* like the *volur*’.

Fritzner was an early interpreter of the *vétt* as a shamanic drum, along the same lines as those common in Sámi culture (1877: 196f), and this idea has been developed at greater length more recently by Kabell (1980). However, this is in many ways a problematic interpretation. Clearly the *vétt* was some kind of instrument to be struck or beaten, or rather tapped lightly, but it must be emphasised that the most obvious sense of ‘drum’ is purely conjectural. No trace of drums has ever been found in Norse archaeological contexts, nor anything that might resemble a drum-hammer or beater. When one considers the contrast with the Sámi culture area, and the relatively numerous finds of both drums and hammers, this seems strange. Admittedly the Sámi drums have mostly been preserved in ethnographic collections of various kinds, but hammers have been excavated, and several of them are made of perishable organic materials such as antler or bone (see chapter 4). In the light of this, it is surely suggestive that nothing similar should have emerged from the archaeology of the Viking world.



Fig. 3.61 A woman with bird's head – a shape-shifter or a valkyrja*? – from the Oseberg tapestry (after Ingstad 1992b: 245; drawing by Sofie Krafft).*

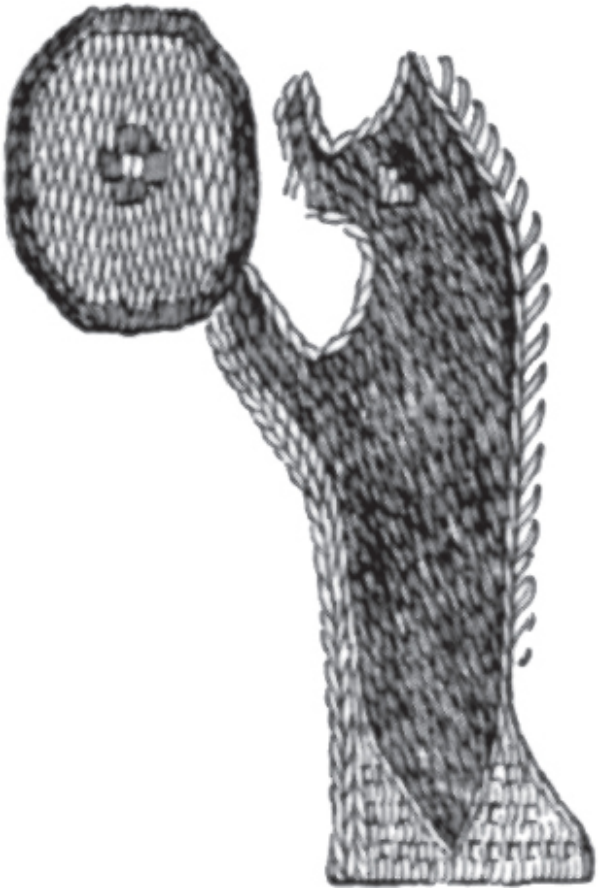


Fig. 3.62 A shield-bearing figure from the Oseberg tapestry that appears to show a woman wearing the skin of a wild boar, or perhaps a female shape-shifter (after Hougen 1940: 104; drawing by Mary Storm).

Another possibility is that the *vétt* was a kind of lid, for a tub or barrel, as Strömbäck proposed (1935: 22ff) and Dronke concurs (1997: 362). One may recall the buckets present in the 'staff graves' such as Bj. 845 and 660 as we have seen above – could these conceivably have been *vétt* (I am indebted to Lisabet Guðmundsdóttir for this suggestion)? We should note here too that in many parts of the circumpolar world, including Sápmi, drums were quite frequently replaced in the rituals by other objects – pot lids, pieces of wood or anything else on which a beat could be maintained (see chapters 4 and 5). In one case though, the idea of *vétt* as a drum is reinforced by its use in certain

kennings for shields, such as *Hildar vett* from Þjóðólfr's *Haustlong* and referring to the *valkyrja* Hildr (1; see the discussion in North's edition, p.14f, and chapter 6 below). Like other shield-kennings, this one clearly suggests the slightly bowed form of the shield, and thus by analogy a drum.

With an obvious caveat against future finds, we may be forced to tentatively conclude that the *vétt* was not likely to have been a drum, but something else. It is even possible that we have found many of them but do not recognise them, for they may have been objects of everyday use (such as wooden bowls) that took on a temporary specialised function according to their context. Again, there are Siberian parallels here.

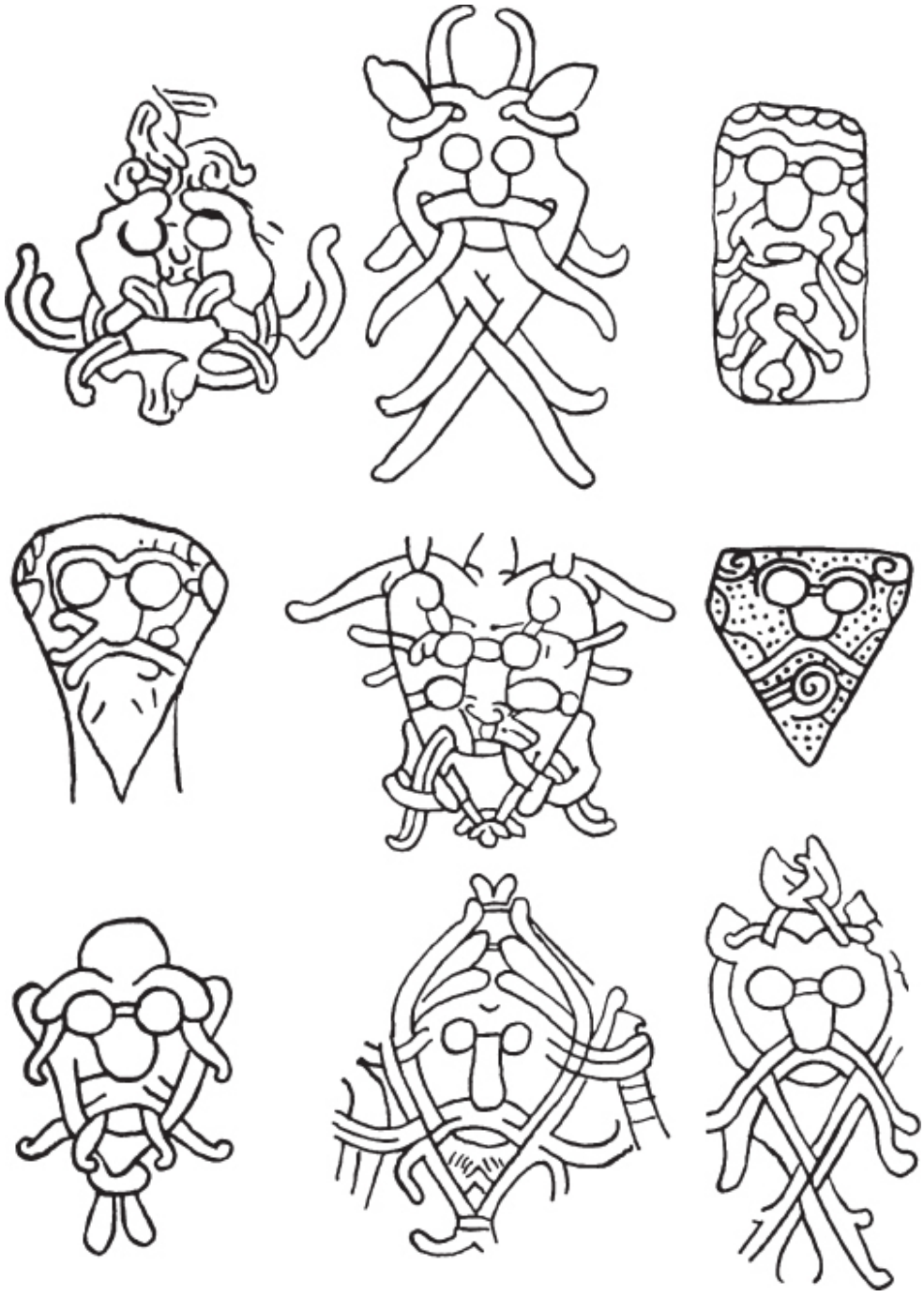


Fig. 3.63 'Face-mask' motifs from Viking Age contexts. Top row, left to right: an oarlock from the Gokstad ship; runestone from Aarhus (DR 66); runestone from Skern (DR 81). Centre row, left to right: runestone from Sjelle (DR 62); an ornamented antler object from Køge, Sjælland; the axe from Mammen. Bottom row, left to right: runestone from Västra Strö (DR 335); runestone

from Bösarp (DR 258); runestone from Lundagård (DR 314). After Floderus 1945: 35.





Fig. 3.64 A late tenth-century runestone from Aarhus, Denmark (DR 66), decorated with a face-mask in the Mammen style. In the fragmentary inscription a fallen Viking is given a classic tribute by his friends: 'Gunúlfr and Øgotr and Aslakr and Hrólfr set up this stone in memory of Fulr, their comrade-in-arms. He found death … when kings were fighting.'

There are also other possibilities for some kind of object use for the maintenance of a steady beat during Old Norse rituals. In Ibn Fadlan's account of the ship cremation on the Volga in 922, a group of men are described as using "shields and staves" to beat in unison before and/or during the sacrifice of a slave-girl (translated in Foote & Wilson 1980: 410). As a passive spectator Ibn Fadlan interprets this as a ruse to drown out the woman's screams, so that the other slaves present will not in the future refuse to volunteer for sacrifice at their own masters' funerals. This seems rather unlikely as it would presume considerable stupidity on the part of the slaves, so it may be that the drumming had some other function in the ritual which we do not understand. It is also possible that these are the same men who later have sex with the slave-girl and then actually assist in her death: this would not make sense if they are simultaneously drumming to shut out the sounds of her distress, but the text is quite confusing at this point and such an interpretation is certainly possible. If Ibn Fadlan has understood the scene correctly then they would also have to continue drumming for a very long time, whereas if the shield-beating had some other purpose then it would be consistent for the drummers and killers to be the same. It may be significant that the men with the shields are also the bearers of an intoxicating drink given to the slave-girl before she is taken to the place of sacrifice; this drink and the sexual elements of the ritual are discussed below. Morten Lund Warmind (1995: 134) compares the shield-beating to the *vapnatak*, the

clashing together of weapons that marked decisions taken at the *þing*. He argues that in the funeral ritual it is a way of hallowing the proceedings, and of marking out a sphere of the sacred.

Staffs and wands

If the written sources for *seiðr*-performers are taken collectively, there is no doubt that one object above all others was characteristic of the sorcerer's equipment – a staff. They appear in various forms and under different names, sometimes linked to specific functions or to the separate terminologies of those who wielded them. These are examined individually below, in both historical and archaeological form, but it is clear that in one sense at least they were seen collectively as part of the material repertoire of magic (cf. Gardeła 2016, discussed more fully in ch. 8 below). This prominence of staffs in the apparatus of Old Norse sorcery is seen in several contexts, of which perhaps the most expressive are the Norwegian law codes from the twelfth century:

Engi maðr skal hafa í húsi sínu staf eða stalla, vítt eða blót eða þat er til heiðins siðar veit.

No man shall have in his house staff or altar, device for sorcery or sacrificial offering, or whatever relates to heathen practice.

Eiðsivaþingslov 1:24 in NGL 1.383

The seiðstafr and its analogues

There are three references in the sagas to the staffs wielded by the *volur* and *spákonur*. The most detailed of these occurs in the famous passage from *Eiríks saga rauða* (4) that has been quoted above. Here the staff is simply called *stafr*, and is described as follows:

ok hvn hafdi staf i hendi ok var a knappr hann var bvinn md mersingv ok settr steinum ofan vm knappin and she had a staff in her hand with a knob at the top, adorned with brass set with stones on top *Eiríks saga rauða*, Hauksbók version, 4: 108–9; translation after Kunz 2000: 658

The phrase describing the location of the stones is ambiguous, and can mean 'below', 'above' or 'around'; clearly they are set near the knob, but we cannot be sure exactly where. We are told nothing of how the staff is used, or under what circumstances. The *volva* Þorbiorg holds it in her hand as she arrives,

after which the staff is not mentioned. Bringing it with her, it cannot have been among ‘the things she required to perform *seiðr*’ that the household provide for her, and it appears more as a symbol of her power. There is no question that it is one of the main tools of her trade.

A second description appears in *Vatnsdæla saga* (44), also reviewed above, and offers a quite different image of the staff in action and the uses to which it is put. The term used here is *stafsprota*, meaning something like ‘staff-rod’ or ‘staff-stick’. No indication of its appearance is given, but curiously it has its own name, Hognuðr, with an approximate meaning of ‘Useful’. There are exceptions, but normally objects are only given individual names if they are regarded as being of great worth, examples being swords and other weapons among humans, and almost any kind of object associated with the gods. Here the staff is in the possession of the *spákona*, Þórdís, and is put to a very specific use. Seeking to convince a certain Guðmundr to agree to the terms of a law suit, Þorkell Þorgrímsson asks the advice of the seeress. She tells him to wear her ‘black cloak’ (*kufl minn inn svarta*) and take the staff in his hand, and to strike Guðmundr three times with it on his left cheek. As a result Guðmundr becomes slightly confused and forgetful, enough to delay the case and make his claim void, but not sufficient that anyone thinks it odd. Afterwards, the *spákona* tells Þorkell to strike Guðmundr again with the staff, three times on his right cheek: he then recovers his memory. He does not remember the incident with the staff, but realises that something unusual has happened to cause his sudden drying up in court, saying, *ok má vera, at við ramman væri reip at draga* (‘it may be that I was pulling on a rope against a strong man’). We may note that there is no mention of any kind of *argr* behaviour attaching to Þorkell for his use of the staff and the *spákona*’s cloak.

The third mention comes from a short section of *Laxdæla saga* (76), and is worth quoting in full as it contains the only description of a *volva*’s grave. The saga’s heroine, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, has become religious in her old age and prays regularly in nocturnal vigils at the church at Helgafell, in which she is accompanied by her friend Herdís Bolladóttir. One night Herdís has a dream in which a bad-tempered woman appears to her, complaining that Guðrún is tossing and turning on top of her every night, and scalding her with tears. She adds that she has chosen Herdís to convey a message because she prefers her company, though she has a ‘strange air’ about her. On hearing of the dream,

Guðrún orders the church floor dug up at the spot where she is accustomed to pray:
Þar fundusk undir bein; þau váru blá ok illilig; þar fannsk ok kinga ok seiðstafr mikill. Þóttusk menn þá vita, at þar mundi verit hafa voluleiði nokkut. Váru þau bein færð langt í brott, þar sem sízt var manna vegr.

Underneath they found bones, which were blue [or 'black'] and ill-looking, together with a brooch and a great *seiðr*-staff [*seiðstafr*]. People then realised that a *volva* must have been buried there. The bones were moved to a remote place, where people were least likely to pass by.

Laxdæla saga (76); my translation

An interesting motif occurs here, in the location of a church above a place with some form of spiritual significance, and the name Helgafell (there are several in Iceland) reinforces this. The fact of the *volva*'s association with this locality echoes the Spákonufell where Þórdís lived.

A staff also appears in connection with a *volva*'s divination in quite a different context, in *Orvar-Odds saga* (2) when it is used – by a man – as a weapon against the sorceress herself. This is one of the few examples of violence directed against a *volva* by the recipient of a prophecy not to his liking. Prior to the *volva* Heiðr's arrival at the farm, Oddr has consistently opposed her invitation, and during her later revelation of the future he has remained hidden under a cloak (perhaps a parallel with Þorgeirr's actions at the *alþing* discussed above). The *volva* asks who is concealed under the cloak, and Oddr emerges carrying a *sprota* staff. He threatens to beat her with it if she tells his future. When she does so anyway, he strikes her with the staff, drawing blood. Heiðr states that no-one has ever struck her before and leaves, but not before accepting gifts in compensation from the householder.

Presumed staffs of sorcery also appear in two other non-human contexts, interestingly specifying that they were made of iron. The most dramatic of these comes from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (33), in an episode describing the supernatural population of Iceland defending the country against a hostile sorcerer. Amongst many apparitions, the one decisive in seeing off the unwelcome visitor is a mountain giant who carries an iron staff (*járnstafr*) in his hand, the purpose of which is not explained. The passage is reproduced in

chapter 6 below. Similarly, in *Njáls saga* (133), Flósi has a dream vision of a man wearing a goatskin who also carries a *járnstafr*. The man declares himself to be Járngrímr, an Óðinn-name, and then recites a list of men's names and a battle poem. The man then strikes the ground with his staff, making a great crashing sound, and disappears. The dream is interpreted to mean that all those named by the supernatural visitor will die.

The volr

A probable analogue for the *(seið)stafr* is a term not found in the Old Norse literature in connection with sorcery, but which can be inferred from the very name of the sorcerers themselves: *volva* means simply 'staff-bearer', and derives from *volr*, 'staff'. Presumably therefore, in some circumstances *volr* could also be used to denote a seeress's staff. A version of the word occurs once in *Skáldskaparmál* 18, when the giantess Gríðr lends Þórr her staff called Gríðavolr, 'Gríðr's Staff'. Steinsland (1991: 162) calls this a *volva*'s staff, but this is inference alone. Þórr uses it to help him ford a river, and it appears in Eilífr Goðrúnarsson's *Þórsdrápa* as *hógbrotningi skógar*, 'the forest's handy fragment' (tr. Faulkes 1987: 86) suggesting that he thought it was made of wood. Roberta Frank (1986) argues that it is a symbol of aristocratic power, a theme developed for other staffs by Steinsland (1991: 163–8).

The gandr and gondull

Another Old Norse term that has been interpreted as referring to a staff for ritual use is *gandr*, first discussed once again by Fritzner in his 1867 dictionary. His citation there refers to a stick or staff, employed especially as an instrument of sorcery either for general purposes or as part of shape-changing rituals. As we have seen in chapter 2, it has also been understood to refer to a whole category of sorcery, and further meanings will be reviewed below. The interpretation of *gandr* in Norse ritual remains far from clear even now, but here we can confine ourselves to the arguments for its use in the sense of a staff.

Shortly after his dictionary discussion, the suggestion was made that *gandr* was a Sámi concept that had been loaned into Old Norse, an idea partly based on the *Historia Norvegiae* discussed below, but this notion was soon disposed of by Fritzner himself (1877: 164). The term occurs in several texts, in contrast to the various *stafr* permutations, but this may reflect the range of

meanings that *gandr* could convey. Some translators, such as Hollander (1962) and Terry (1990), avoid the issue entirely by rendering it in terms of general magical activity. Others take a definite stance, as with Wilbur's reading of *vítti hón ganda* in *Voluspá* 22/4, which he translates as 'she consecrated the staves' (1959). Larrington (1996: 7) gives the same phrase as 'she charmed them with spells', but curiously adopts the meaning of 'staff' in her version of strophe 29, where she translates *spáganda* as 'a rod of divination' (1996: 8).

This variation is typical of the *gandr* problematic. By the late Middle Ages and early modern period in Norway, *gand* had come to hold a number of disparate meanings, summarised by Nils Lid in 1927 (see also Tolley 1995a: 66). These included 'stick' in the sense of a cane or staff; 'swollen ridge around a damaged place on a tree'; and simply 'magic', specifically associated with the Sámi and in particular with a special form of doll used to curse a victim and constructed from pieces of wood, hair and nail parings. The latter meaning is almost certainly very late, and matches a class of objects that are familiar from European folklore and late medieval witchcraft over a broad region (see Merrifield 1987 for a range of excavated examples found in house foundations, secreted inside wall-spaces, and so on). However, the sense of 'staff' is clear and is found in other contexts which reflect the same meaning, for example as an element in place-names referring to coastal inlets with long, very narrow elongated forms coming to a clear and dramatic point (these include Gandvik in Finnish Karelia, and the Gøndfjord east of Stavanger; Fritzner 1877: 164–5).

The idea that sorcerers *rode* the staff was also introduced by Fritzner, a notion that quickly broadened into a discussion of the relationship between *gandr* and *seiðr*. This has been briefly reviewed in the preceding chapter, and is taken up again in chapter 5, but for now we can concentrate on the debate as to what the *gandr* actually was. Gustav von Düben argued that it referred to both the staff used by a woman in the practice of *seiðr*, and the stick ridden by witches (1873: 273). However, this interpretation was rejected on etymological grounds by Fritzner himself, against his own earlier dictionary citation, though he left open the question of an operative link between the two practices (1877: 167–9). De Vries (1931a: 53) built on this to suggest that the very connotation of 'staff' itself derives from later traditions of the witch's

broomstick, and does not reflect the meaning of the word in the Viking Age. It is here that the problems relating to the meaning of *gandr* really begin, for there is also an argument for a 'staff' of a kind that was *not* used for riding. It certainly seems that the first uses of the word in the sense of a witch's broomstick come in the fourteenth century, for example in *Þórsteins saga bœjarmagns* when the central character uses a *krókstafr*, a 'crooked stick', to go on a *gandreið* (see below and chapter 5; also Bø 1960).

Clive Tolley, who has made the most extensive recent study of *gandr* (1995a), adopts aspects of de Vries' position, by arguing that it has no primary meaning as 'staff' at all. He follows a different line, in which the *gandr*, plural *gandir*, are seen not as items of equipment but as helping spirits of some kind; this alternative reading is discussed below. However, even if we accept this idea, the staff argument is refined further by Tolley himself who suggests that we should instead be focusing our attention on the tools used to *summon* the *gandir*. It is here that confusion has arisen, he claims, because this instrument was named with a derivative of *gandr*, namely *gondull*.

There is a small corpus of compelling evidence that the *gondull* was something from which the *gandir* were sent out, but the relevant sources are of quite late medieval date (see Mitchell 2003). They centre upon the records of a court case held in Bergen in 1325, when a woman on trial for witchcraft made the following statement:

ritt ek i frá mér gondulls ondu[m], ein þér í bak bíti, annar í brjóst þér bíti, þriði snúi uppá þik hæimt [heipt?] ok ofund I ride [or 'thrust'] from me *gondull*'s breaths, one to bite you in the back, another to bite you in the breast, a third to turn harm and evil upon you.

Diplomatarium Norvegicum IX: 93

The accused witch, Ragnhildr, then added that after singing the above charm one should spit on the enemy towards whom it was directed. It is probable that the 'breaths of the *gondull*' (its spirits?) took the form of wolves, because an almost exactly similar charm that specifies such creatures is recorded in German from another witchcraft trial in Basel from 1407 (Ohrt 1935–36: 202; Tolley 1995a: 69). As we shall see shortly, this fits exactly with other sources on the *gandir* spirits that might have been summoned. The idea of the witch's breath as a bringer of doom was known in the Middle Ages, and is also found

in kennings which mention breaths from the *gondull* (Weiser-Aall 1936: 77f; Tolley 1995a: 69f). However, we here face the same problem of interpretation as the 'witch's broomstick' reading of *gandr*, because the sources can be seen in the context of a much later tradition of witchcraft that has little relation to Old Norse sorcery but which has nonetheless appropriated aspects of its vocabulary. Nevertheless, the idea of this kind of projected malice is not at all unlikely for the Viking Age, and fits with a much wider complex of magical projectiles that are known from throughout the circumpolar region, especially among the Sámi; these are discussed in chapter 4, but see also Lid's magisterial study of this phenomenon (1958).

Far more convincing to my mind are the sexual associations of the *gondull*-staff, that may well illuminate the nature of the rituals involved in the summoning of the *gandir*. These are discussed below in the section on engendering *seiðr*, but are in themselves sufficient evidence that the *gondull* really was some kind of tool used in the *gandr-seiðr* complex. For now, its possible function as the means of summoning and unleashing the *gandir* (or perhaps *gondulls andar*) must remain speculation. It should be noted though that Tolley, whom as we have seen has made the most comprehensive study of this matter, is convinced of such an interpretation. On this topic we may lastly add that some support is provided again from Siberian religion, as there are several instances of spirits being summoned by means of a staff; among the Ket, for example, the shaman's staff had a crossbar on which the invoked spirits could rest (Nioradze 1925: 79).

The gambanteinn and tamsvondr

Another type of staff used in sorcery, the *gambanteinn*, is known from only two sources, the Eddic poems *Hárbarðzljóð* and *Skírnismál*. In both cases the staff is used either by gods or their servants, though previously owned in one instance by a giant (see Steinsland 1991: 162 for the possible significance of this), and it may be that the *gambanteinn* was a tool only of the highest levels of the ritual community. The name means simply '*gamban*-twig', and has definite connotations of slenderness and flexibility. In *Skírnismál* strophe 32, it is made from a freshly-cut sapling, which supports the idea of a slim cane.

The element *gamban*- occurs once more in *Skírnismál*, in strophe 33 with *gambanreiði* ('*gamban*-wrath'), and here it is clear that it refers to something of great power or magnificence, even divinity, thus strengthening the

association of *gambanteinn* with the gods. A similar connotation is found in *Lokasenna* 8, with *gambansumbl* (‘*gamban*-feast’; see Söderberg 1984: 59 for further discussion). Some have suggested a reference to divination (van Hamel 1932; Sturtevant 1956;) but this is uncertain and may relate again to the notion of magical potency (de Vries 1957: § 229; the etymology has also been reviewed by Steinsland, 1991: 160ff). The *gambanteinn* is probably therefore to be understood as ‘twig of power’ or ‘twig of potency’, although the most accurate translation might well be ‘magic wand’ in the original sense of the term, notwithstanding its unfortunate modern connotations of party tricks and story-book wizards.

It is striking that the *gambanteinn* is used for the same purpose in both poems, namely to drive a person insane. In *Hárbarðzljóð* 20, Óðinn is given the staff by the giant Hlébarðr, and then uses it to rob him of his wits, to Þórr’s disgust. In *Skírnismál* 26, more detail is given, when Skírnir, on an errand from Freyr, threatens the giantess Gerðr with a *gambanteinn*. A full ten strophes (27–36) are then spent describing the extent of the ‘frenzy of wandering madness’ (in Orchard’s phrase, 1997: 52) that will descend upon Gerðr: utterly deranged, she will howl with grief, travel constantly oppressed by hostile supernatural beings of some kind, rejecting food and wasting away in the shadow of the gods’ contempt.

Interestingly, in both poems there is a further dimension of the *gambanteinn*’s effects, which serves as a background to the infliction of madness, namely a theme of sexual submission coupled with the instilling of an ungovernable lust. In *Hárbarðzljóð*, Óðinn receives the staff immediately after he has seduced and slept with seven sisters, who are later termed *myrkriðor* (an interesting parallel to the *volva* Þorbiorg’s nine sisters in *Eiríks saga rauða*). This prolonged sexual conquest of sorceresses is described over four strophes (16–19), and the notion that Óðinn has bent the women to his desire is reinforced by his admission that he employed *manvélar*, ‘love-spells’. It is at this point that the *gambanteinn* is mentioned.

In *Skírnismál* the sexual overtones are even more explicit, as is the idea that the *gambanteinn* forces submission to the wielder’s will. In strophe 26 it is referred to as a *tamsvondr*, a ‘taming wand’, apparently a synonym for *gambanteinn* that further illuminates its function: *Tamsvendi ek þik drep, /en ek þik temia mun, /mær, at mínom munom*. ‘With taming wand I touch you,

/for I will make you tame, /girl, to my wishes.' (trans. after Dronke 1997: 382). The complete surrender of free-will is emphasised in strophe 30, and in 31 and 34 it is further made clear that the victim has no say in her choice of sexual partner, this too being at the wand-bearer's command.

At least as described in *Skírnismál*, the *gambanteinn* seems to have been empowered by the carving of runes upon it, and it is stated that the removal of these marks would reverse the charms thus effected (see also de Vries 1957: §370). In strophe 36 Skírnir names the three runes that he will carve on the *gambanteinn*, which show more clearly than anything else the nature of the staff's power: *ergi*, *æði* and *óþoli*. The first of these, *ergi*, is a problematic concept that is discussed extensively below; as we shall see it is most often used to describe a curious state of being for men, where it has connotations of 'passive' homosexuality in the sense of playing the penetrated role in the sexual act. However, when used of women in a heterosexual context, as in *Skírnismál* 36, *ergi* refers not to a Norse notion of perversion but instead to an overwhelming lust. Both *æði* and *óþoli* refer to burning pains that afflict the genitals, something made clear by their very specific role among the torments of the lecherous in Hell in later medieval texts (Dronke 1997: 413). Both terms have connotations of agony, combined with a 'sexual itch' of irresistible desire. The three runes of the *gambanteinn* can therefore be translated approximately as '(Extreme) Lust', 'Burning (with genital connotations)' and 'Unbearable (Sexual) Need'. Their place in the complex of Old Norse sexual spells is discussed in Dronke's introduction to *Skírnismál* (1997: 398f).

The *gambanteinn* thus emerges as a particularly terrible weapon, employed by the highest levels of the sorcerous hierarchy within a narrow range of sexual and violent functions.

Staffs of sorcery

It appears that the staff not only played a central role in *seiðr* and its associated rituals, but also that there were *different types of staff*, used by specific individuals for specific purposes. We may summarise them as follows:

stafr

- an attribute of the *volva* implied use in the course of summoning *varðlok(k)ur* spirits, and for divination?

seiðstafr

- an attribute of the *volva* could be very large

járnstafr

- an attribute of supernatural beings?

stafsprota

- an attribute of the *spákona* used to strike an enemy directly, on the face
- used to rob an enemy of his memory, and to instil mild confusion implied use in divination?

volr

- no direct information, but can be inferred to have been used generally by
- the *volur* distinct phallic connotations

gandr/gondull

- probably used for summoning *gandir* spirits, and their release for
- clairvoyance or prophecy, and sometimes the infliction of injury on others associated with the working of sexual magic (either sorcery with sexual
- objectives, or sorcery involving sexual acts in its performance) possibly used for riding, especially with intent to bring injury to one's enemies

gambanteinn/tamsvondr

- used for severely disordering an enemy's mind specifically employed for instilling both uncontrollable lust and (sexual) subservience to the wielder
- of the staff possible, though doubtful, connotations of divination Thus once again we see the connection between violent or aggressive sorcery and sexual themes, furthermore associated with specific instruments for the implementation of such magic.

The question as to exactly how the staffs were used in the *seiðr* rituals is, in one sense, impossible to answer: we simply do not know, and the surviving sources do not tell us. However, there is a possible solution to be found in the ethnographic analogies that can be drawn from the other circumpolar cultures; this will be considered in chapter 5. A second line of enquiry concerns the sexual aspects of the *seiðr* complex; these are discussed further below.

Staffs from archaeological contexts

From their literary descriptions we can see that the various forms of staff differed quite markedly in appearance. There are no explicit descriptions of a *gandr* or *gondull*, only circumstantial evidence that they came to a sharp point and were probably made of wood. The *gambanteinn* was made of wood, appears to have been quite slender, and was perhaps carved with runes; this was probably the smallest of the staffs. The *volr* may also have been wooden. The *stafr* was fitted with brass and set with 'stones', and had at least one knob; there is no indication of the material used for the main shaft. The *seiðstafr* could be quite large. As their name implies, the two *járnstafr* held by dream beings and giants were made of iron.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that these descriptions are unlikely to be exact, notwithstanding the source-critical problems associated with their saga contexts, nor are they necessarily representative. There is no possibility to exactly match archaeological finds with these objects – in the circumstances we must also add source criticism of the material culture to that of the literary evidence. However, we can use these descriptions to isolate archaeological finds which might reasonably be placed within the general category of staffs of sorcery.

These principally concern a number of iron staff-like objects found in graves from all over Scandinavia (principally western Norway), all differing slightly in appearance but with common characteristics. A small number of comparable pieces are also known in wood. All these are collected and presented below, beginning with the 'type-examples' from Birka, Klinta and Fyrkat, after which some general observations are made on their interpretation. This is followed by a catalogue of all the other known examples (with updated detail and references from Gardeła's subsequent listing, 2016: 268–347; see chapter 8 below).

The Birka staffs

Three of the staffs from Birka are discussed by Greta Arwidsson (1986), Bøgh-Andersen (1999: 71–6) and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir (2007: 94–7); note that prior to Gardeła's 2012 re-evaluation, this was believed to be the entire corpus from that site, as discussed above. Due to their common qualities they build a 'Birka type' somewhat distinct from the other examples discussed below, while the knob-like mounts on the shafts are paralleled only on the staffs from Klinta, Tuna, Fyrkat and two from Russia (Fig. 3.65).

As described above, the staff that in fact derives from chamber grave Bj. 660 was rediscovered by Gardeła and Andersson in 2012. It now consists of 13 iron fragments and a single bronze mount (Figs 3.66, 3.67). These are too badly corroded to reconstruct the object in terms of length and quality, but provide enough data to correlate with Stolpe's field records. It is also clear that the staff was of the same broad type as the other three, better-preserved examples from Birka.

When first discovered, the staff that has now been confirmed as coming from Bj. 760 was approximately 0.75 m long (Arbman 1940: pl. 125; 1943: 232), though now only 0.45 m survives in a very poor state of preservation (Gardeła 2016: 326–329). The point is missing, and so the staff was originally even longer. The shaft is of square-section iron, 1 cm in thickness, and at some point along its length once had a four-sided knob. The latter was found loose in the grave detached from the shaft, so its original position along its length is unknown; the knob is now lost. The 'handle' is 14.5 cm long, and consists of six round-section iron rods compressed quite tightly around the shaft (Fig. 3.68). Where the 'handle' meets the shaft is a mount in the form of an animal head, with the shaft emerging from its jaws. Its eyes are moulded in detail, and the head is decorated with circle-and-dot ornament. At the mid-point of the 'handle' is a composite mount consisting of five decorated bronze plates fixed around the shaft to give a faceted appearance. The plates are decorated with punched dots in lines following the axis of the staff. The terminal of the 'handle' is a polyhedral bronze knob with indistinct decoration. From this emerges a small flat plate, but this is too corroded to make out any detail.



Fig. 3.65 The three possible staffs of sorcery from Birka graves Bj. 760 (marked 3a–d, and wrongly designated to Bj. 660), 834 (1a–b) and 845 (2a–

c), photographed in the late 1930s; all three objects are in a poorer state of preservation today (after Arbman 1940: pl. 125).



Fig. 3.66 The 13 iron fragments from the staff in Birka grave Bj. 660, rediscovered in the Swedish History Museum in 2012 by Gardeła and Andersson (photo by Gabriel Hilderbrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).



Fig. 3.67 The bronze mount from the staff in Birka grave Bj. 660, rediscovered in the Swedish History Museum in 2012 by Gardeła and Andersson (photo by Gabriel Hilderbrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

The staff from Bj. 834 was 0.77 m long when found, though now only 0.57 m remains (Arbman 1940: pl. 125; 1943: 305ff; Gardeła 2016: 330f; Figs 3.69, 3.70). Its original length was probably greater, as the point had already corroded away when it was discovered. The iron shaft is approximately 1 cm thick and square in section, with two polyhedral knobs of bronze with circle-and-dot decoration located respectively 0.19 m and 0.44 m from the base of the 'handle'. The latter, which is 10.7 cm long, is formed of ten twisted iron rods of which one is now missing, joined above and below by a polyhedral bronze knob of the same kind as those on the shaft (Fig. 3.71). All the knobs were decorated with four circle-and-dot designs on each four-sided facet, except for that at the point where the 'handle' joins the shaft, which had five such dots. At the mid-point of the 'handle', the rods are encircled by a bronze band engraved with a repeating diamond pattern.



Fig. 3.68 The staff from Birka grave Bj. 760, originally misattributed to Bj. 660 (photo by Gabriel Hilderbrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).



Fig. 3.69 The staff from Birka grave Bj. 834, as found and reconstructed (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 74; drawing by Håkan Dahl, used by kind permission).



Fig. 3.70 Detail from one of the shaft mounts on the staff from Birka grave Bj. 834 (photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons)



Fig. 3.71 Detail of the ‘handle’ of the staff from Birka grave Bj. 834 (photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

The staff found in Bj. 845 was in very fragmentary condition when discovered (Arbman 1940: pl. 125; 1943: 320; Gardeła 2016: 332f; Figs 3.72, 3.73). According to Stolpe’s field drawings, its length when found was approximately 0.7 m. The shaft is again four-sided and about 1 cm in thickness, tapering to a point. The 14 cm-long ‘handle’ was very damaged, but it appears that it once had ten iron rods bowing out around the central shaft in a ‘basket’ form. At the mid-point, the rods passed through a perforated bronze disc which maintained the even form of the ‘handle’. Like the staff from Bj. 834, the rods were joined above and below by polyhedral bronze knobs with four circle-and-dot decorations on each four-sided facet. The knob at the point where the ‘handle’ meets the shaft is drilled completely through in two places on opposite sides of the polyhedron. These holes are approximately 1.5 mm wide, and could have held nothing thicker than a thread or very thin wire; nothing was found attached to them. Another knob of the same kind as those on the ‘handle’ was fixed to the shaft 0.14 m below the ‘handle’. A small triangular plate projects from one of the polyhedron’s facets, on the side nearest the ‘handle’. The plate is perforated with a single hole, about 1.5 mm in diameter. Again, nothing was found that might have been attached to it.

The Klinta staff

The staff from the double grave at Klinta on Öland is also a special case. When found its total length was 0.82 m, but one end had been broken off and it is clear that originally the object was longer – perhaps substantially so if the tapering profile was projected to a point (Gardeła 2016: 342ff; Andersson 2018: 180–4; Fig. 3.74). The staff had been badly affected by the fire of the cremation and was broken in several places.

The shaft is square in section, and up to 3 cm on a side. 52 cm from the broken end of the staff is a ‘basket’-like construction 18 cm long, made of four iron rods curving out from the shaft and then rejoining it. At the point where each rod joins the shaft, both above and below, it is gripped in the jaws of a small bronze animal head, resembling a wolf – eight heads in all. On the shaft, 7.5 cm below the ‘basket’, is a polyhedral bronze knob.

Björkö 845

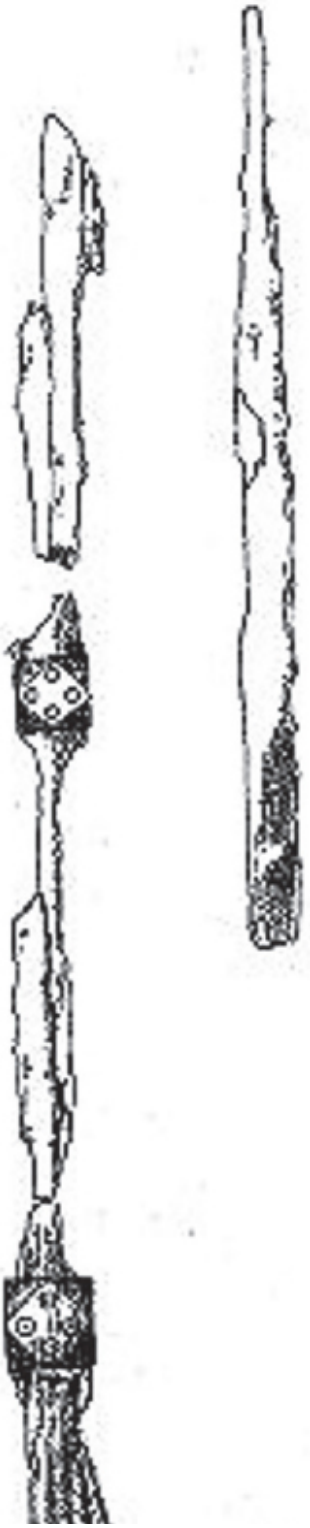
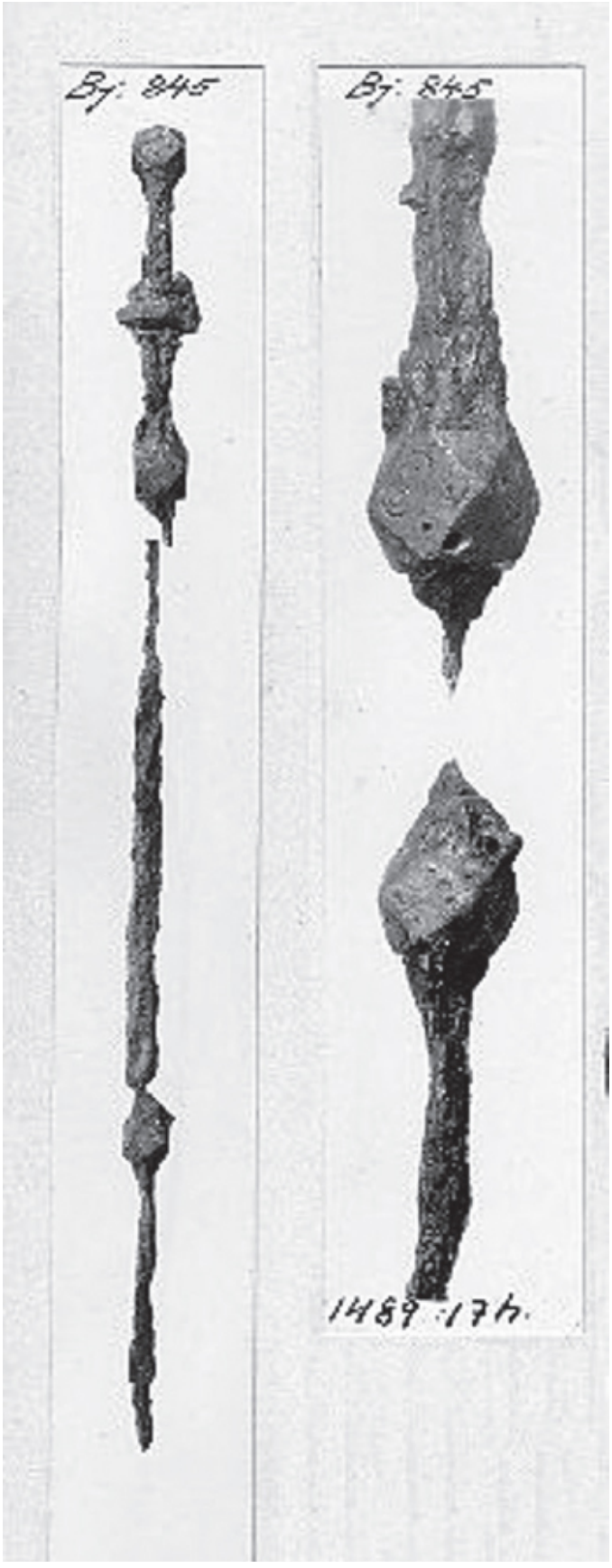




Fig. 3.72 The staff from Birka grave Bj. 845 (drawing by Harald Faith-Ell, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).


By: 845
By: 845
1489 : 17h.

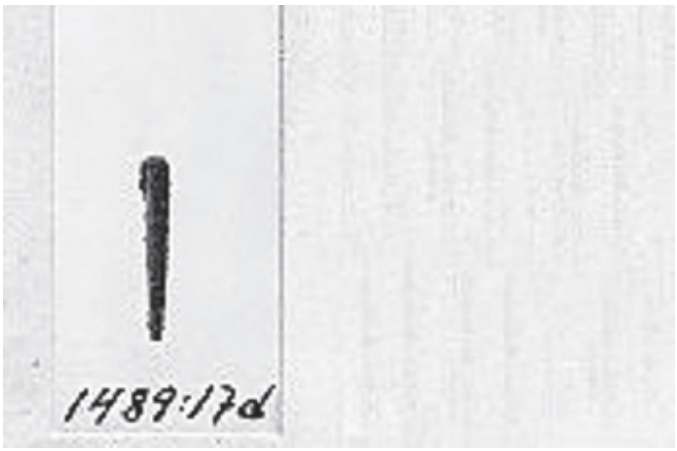


Fig. 3.73 The staff from Birka grave Bj. 845 (photo by Harald Faith-Ell, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

Above the ‘basket’ the shaft continues for 8 cm until the staff terminates in a flat bronze plate, 4 cm square with slightly concave edges. On top of this is a bronze model of a building, apparently a hall of the kind known from the Trelleborg-type enclosures and elsewhere in the Viking world (Figs 3.75, 3.76). The building has a ridged roof apparently covered with planks, and wall buttresses along the long sides which each have a central door (in passing, we can note that this object forms one of the very few contemporary images of a building from the Viking Age and has been widely used in reconstructions). On each corner of the bronze plate sits an animal of some kind – only one is now preserved – stretching up to the eaves of the building. Underneath the bronze plate, from the mid-point of three of the sides (and probably originally the fourth), there extends a small loop of bronze with an eye about 2 mm in diameter; what, if anything, was attached to these is unknown. Only one similar object is known, a square and heavily decorated bronze plaque from the Roskilde area (Christensen 2015: 94f) that also has a three-dimensional building model placed centrally, and with what appear to be birds at each corner; although described as a ‘brooch’, the object has no fittings for a pin on the reverse, and it is possible that this too is the top of a staff of the Klinta type; it is accordingly marked as such on the distribution map.



Fig. 3.74 The staff from grave 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (photo by Gabriel Hilderbrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

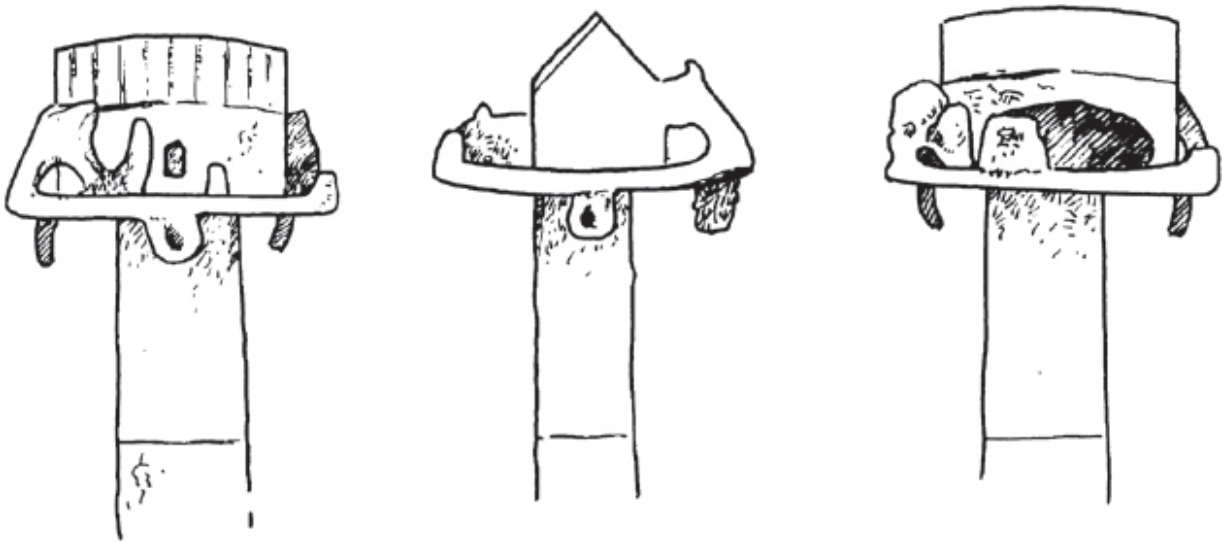


Fig. 3.75 Three views of the miniature building on the staff from grave 59:3 at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (after Schulze 1987: 109).



Fig. 3.76 Detail of the miniature building on the staff from Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (photo by Gabriel Hilderbrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

Interpretations of the staff's function have varied. All have compared it to the Birka staffs, and to their suggested functions discussed below, but Mårten Stenberger (1979: 713) saw it as a status symbol or a cult object. Bøgh-Andersen (1999: 77–80) interprets it as a meat spit. The excavator, K. G. Petersson, suggested that the Klinta staff had a parallel of sorts in the iron 'standard' from the ship burial in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo (1958: 147) – a notion discussed in turn in the Sutton Hoo report (Bruce-Mitford 1978: 427f). Both objects have a 'cage' of iron bars with animal heads at the terminals, and both are similarly puzzling, but the resemblances are not otherwise close. The most obvious parallels are the Birka staffs, with the 'basket' construction and

the polyhedral knob, though the Klinta piece remains unique for its size and for the building model.

In view of its parallels, and the extraordinary nature of the grave in which it was found with its elaborate rituals and gender-crossing artefact correlations, there is no doubt that the Klinta staff may be viewed in the same context as other possible staffs of sorcery.

The Fyrkat staff

The fragmentary staff from grave 4 at Fyrkat was in two pieces, and so badly corroded that both ends of both sections were missing (Roesdahl 1977a: 97–101; Gardeła 2016: 345ff; Fig. 3.77). Its original length is unknown, but the surviving fragments are very small indeed, being only 7 cm and 2.5 cm long, and about 1 cm in diameter – approximately the dimensions of a thick pen. Almost nothing survives of the object today, its condition being so poor when found, and most of the details described here have been discernible only through X-ray analysis. The link to the other possible 'sorcery staffs' comes from its construction and appearance, and its presence in the grave of a woman who on several other grounds might be considered to have been in contact with the supernatural.

The Fyrkat staff is composed of a central iron rod, square in section, bonded on each side with four thinner, circular rods, also of iron. On the longer fragment are two copper alloy knobs, spaced 3 cm apart, through which the five rods are drawn. On the shorter fragment is a single such knob, one one side of which the rods have been fused together into what appears to be a tapering point (this is somewhat unclear on the X-ray, and the end of the 'point' is also missing).

The writers of the Fyrkat report do not make a firm interpretation of the staff, but Roesdahl (1977a: 143) does note its similarities with 'meat spits' of the kind found in Norway, of the Birka type. It should be noted that this was before anyone had suggested that these latter objects might instead be staffs of sorcery. I agree with this comparison, though Roesdahl also rightly points out that the knobs are almost identical to those on a mount from the front of a tenth- or eleventh-century reliquary from Viborg (1977b: 27–30). The comparison with another box is compelling: was the Fyrkat 'staff' actually mounted as decoration on the oak chest itself? One argument against this is that the chest was poorly made and further embellishment perhaps less likely.

With a cautious reservation, in the light of the examples considered here and the other objects in grave 4 at Fyrkat, I feel it is justified to include this piece with the rest of the possible ritual staffs. Little more can be added on this fragmentary object, except to note that its slight variation from the other staffs in construction and design – the tapered end especially – may enable us to slightly expand our typologies for magical tools of this kind.

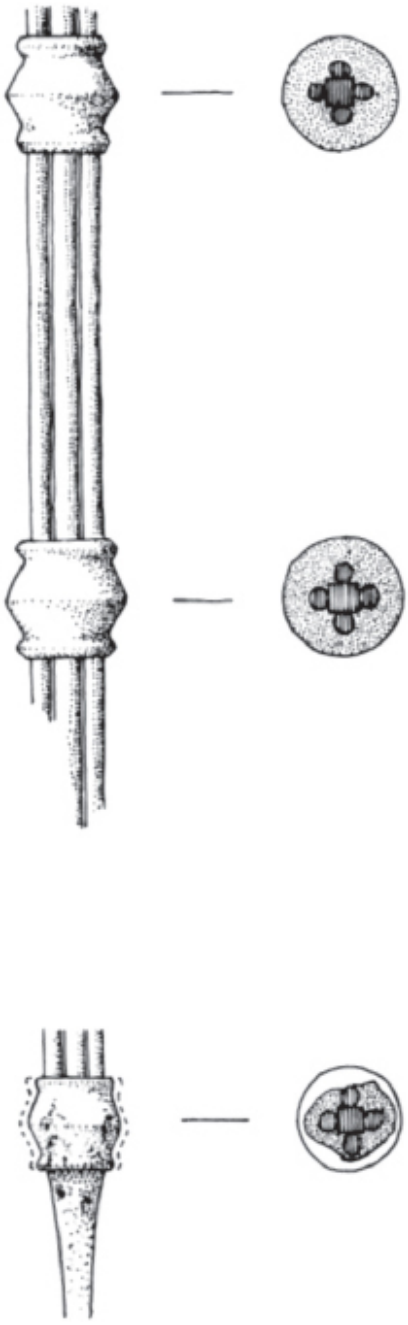


Fig. 3.77 The surviving fragments of the metal staff from grave 4 at Fyrkat, drawn from X-ray photographs (after Roesdahl 1977a: 100; drawing by Flemming Bau).

Interpreting the staffs

One of the earliest descriptions of these objects that we possess is found in Hjalmar Stolpe's field notes from his excavations at Birka, which produced (as we now know) four such finds. Typically sensible, he showed more caution than all subsequent interpreters and freely admitted that he did not know what they were, calling them simply 'iron objects'.

This aside, most other early interpretations all centre around the notion that they were spits for roasting meat, an idea put forward in the 1880s by Lorange and later supported by all the main Norwegian Iron Age specialists of the late nineteenth century including Undset, Gustafson, Shetelig and Bøe. This was expanded upon by Petersen in his catalogue of Viking-Age tools from Norway (1951: 425–9).

Other scholars, such as Rygh (1885), saw them as fragments of lamp-stands, and they have also been interpreted as whip shanks (Brøndsted 1936: 196). Both of these interpretations were proposed in relation to fragmentary examples, and at a time when few other objects of this kind had been published. Neither author had much in the way of comparative material against which to assess his suggestions. When the whole corpus of the objects is reviewed today, some of them in complete condition, it is quite clear that neither of these interpretations is tenable.

Another popular early interpretation of the staffs was as measuring rods, an idea reinforced by the fact that several of them approximated an ell (*aln*) in length. This suggestion was offered by Emil Ekhoff for the Jägarbacken staff in 1896 (Hanson 1983: 8), and it seems to have been Arbman's preferred explanation for the Birka staffs (1943: 278, 305, 320). It is certainly the case that the staffs bear some resemblance to surviving late medieval measuring rods of this kind, which until recently were fixed to the doors of Gotlandic churches (Carlsson 1989: 19ff). Because the Viking-Age examples were overwhelmingly found in what were assumed to be the graves of women, it was proposed that the staffs were probably for measuring out lengths of cloth, the production of which was arguably a female occupation.

A variation on this theme was presented by Ola Kyhlberg in his doctoral thesis, which included a design element on one of the staffs that had hitherto gone unnoticed (1980b: 274–8). He generally follows the idea that they were used to measure length, but on the staff from Bj. 845 he notes the presence of the small perforations on the shaft mounts, one of which is bored through a triangular plate extending out from the knob. He argues that these were for the attachment of some kind of extra element, which was used at right angles to the main shaft as a means to measure volume, either in vessels or of general packaging (*ibid*: 275). Citing a range of measuring systems from prehistory to the post-medieval period, and taking up the earlier ideas on the staffs as ell-lengths, Kyhlberg suggests that the three staffs are broadly equivalent to the Swedish ell (the reaassigned Bj. 760), 16 inches (Bj. 845) and the Sjællandic ell (Bj. 834), and that they may have been used to create standardised forms of vessel (*ibid*: 275).

The implications of this interpretation have not generally been taken up in Viking studies, though the idea of the staffs as units of measure has been followed by Nils Ringstedt in his economic studies of the Birka chamber-graves (1997: 135–44). One difficulty is the lack of standardisation, which would seem to be a requirement for a system of standards. Every staff is different, including those that have perforations or similar features (see the list of staffs below). In favour of the interpretation is the fact that the Scandinavians undoubtedly possessed sophisticated economic measurement, as we see in the ring-money of Scotland, the various coin standards in the later Viking Age, the systems of hacksilver, and not least in the weights which form the main focus of Kyhlberg's 1980b study. The staffs could indeed be a part of this, but as Kyhlberg himself emphasises (*ibid*: 277), this must remain hypothetical. Ingrid Gustin's more recent work (2004, 2010) on the staffs as units of measurement is discussed in chapter 8 below.

The most recent interpretation to have been proposed for these objects is the one of most relevance here – namely that they were staffs of sorcery. The text that follows takes this discussion up to the publication of the first edition; see chapter 8 for the works that subsquently took up this theme, sometimes in interesting new directions.

It had long been noted that some of the staffs were likely to be status symbols of some kind, and that their dignity suggested something more than a

mundane purpose – Stenberger's comments on the Klinta staff are typical of this. Building partly on earlier works by Tove Hjørungdal (1989, 1990) which are discussed below, the first lengthy articulation of the idea was presented by Gundula Adolfsson and Inga Lundström in conjunction with their exhibition *Den starka kvinnan: från völva till häxa* ('The powerful woman: from völva to witch', set out in two different works of the same name, of which the most recently published was written first and should be read in that light: Lundström & Adolfsson 1995: 21; Adolfsson & Lundström 1997: 13f).

Three criteria are put forward by Adolfsson and Lundström for
•interpreting the staffs in this way (1997: 13): their appearance and close
•affinities with each other, and in relation to the literary sources the concentration of their find-spots to areas with Frö/ Frej place-names and
•labyrinths the concentration of their find-spots to the Vestland of Norway, where they consider women to have had a strong role in 'pagan cult'

The first of these receives very great support in the excavated material. Not only do the objects match the written descriptions of the *seiðr* staffs and their analogues, they are found almost exclusively in what seem to be the graves of women of very high status, in several of which are other artefacts which may have had a connection with sorcery ('charms', narcotics, and so on). We also know from *Laxdæla saga* that the *volur* could be buried with their staffs.

Adolfsson and Lundström's other two criteria are less convincing, relying on a decidedly partial reading of Scandinavian prehistory that traces a decline from egalitarian Goddess-worship ("in the beginning men and women are equals") to the chauvinist oppression of Christianity ("this is the beginning of the end of the culture that worships life and love without sin" – Lundström & Adolfsson 1995: 5). To be fair to the authors, they make their political intentions with the exhibition abundantly plain throughout their two publications. An explicitly feminist vision of the later Iron Age is to be welcomed, though the misogyny of the early church has been questioned by scholars working on the phase of conversion in the North (*e.g.* Gräslund 2001a: 84; 2003). The problems arise when such an exercise lets its message distort its material, which in turn weakens the message. This is not the place to list the inaccuracies in these publications, but with respect to the staff criteria we can note that there is no proof whatever that prehistoric labyrinths were

connected to fertility rituals, and the notion that Vestland women were cult leaders relies on *Volsa þáttr* and little else. When it was mounted in Stockholm the exhibition raised considerable protest, not least from those who felt that its simplifications did a disservice to its stated aims (see, for example, the multi-part newspaper debate in *Svenska Dagbladet* 6–11.4.97).

Den starka kvinnan was produced with good intentions, and it included much that was innovative and ground-breaking. Leaving aside its other qualities, the exhibition also made a crucial contribution to Viking studies in that for the first time the figure of the *volva* was given centre stage, in a manner never seen before in publications or public media. At a specific artefactual level, the interpretation of the staffs as tools of sorcery was established at the same time. It has been repeated since then in several archaeological works, discussed below and in the following chapters.

Of course other interpretations are still current, and today the meat spit has not quite disappeared; it should also be noted that this kitchen item can in itself be seen as a metaphor for power and the materiality of social elites (Isaksson 2000: 27f). Susanne Bøgh-Andersen (1999) has published a comprehensive licentiate thesis on Vendel- and Viking-Age roasting spits, with a catalogue of all known finds in the North. She has divided the spits into four types, I–IV, with two variants of type III (*ibid*: 56, 114; Fig. 3.78). Of these, types I and IV are without question objects for roasting, and are not considered further here. Her type II is extremely simple – essentially a straight, pointed iron rod – and thus could potentially have purposes beyond or instead of skewering meat, but the possibilities are so wide open that there is little we can do. As a proviso, however, one should consider her catalogue of examples (Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 46f) as a wider background to what follows.

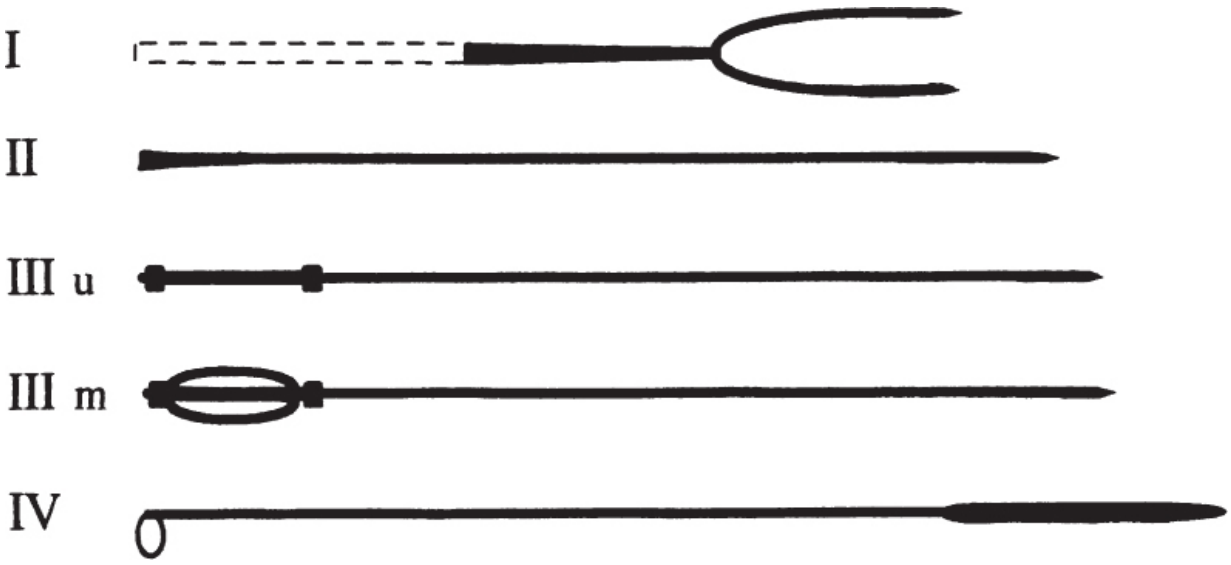


Fig. 3.78 Susanne Bøgh-Andersen's classification system for Nordic roasting spits of the Vendel and Viking periods; types III-M and possibly III-U are here reinterpreted as staffs of sorcery (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 114, used by kind permission).

For our purposes the closer interest comes with Bøgh-Andersen's type III, formed essentially as a straight metal rod with a point at one end and a handle at the other. The two sub-types concern the form of this handle, with either a simple knob or mount differentiating it from the rest of the shaft (type III-U) or an actual handle construction formed of a 'basket'-like cage of bars bowing out from the shaft (type III-M). It is this 'basket' that we have seen on the staffs from Birka and Klinta, which are placed by Bøgh-Andersen as meat spits in her class III-M (*ibid*: 71–80). The question as to whether these objects of her type III actually *are* meat spits is central for a discussion of possible staffs of sorcery.

Throughout her thesis, not least in the title itself, Bøgh-Andersen acknowledges that these objects are not merely functional tools for food preparation. Her opening chapters and conclusion all stress this, and indeed she discusses the staffs with very developed ornamentation – such as those from Birka and Klinta – in terms of status and appearance. Bøgh-Andersen's work clearly focuses on the roasting spits themselves, however, and this tangential argument is not taken to its logical conclusions. The problem is not that she has misinterpreted the meat spits that form the bulk of her useful study, but that she does not develop the idea that some of the more elaborate objects are not 'symbolic' spits at all – they are something else entirely, with resemblances to the spits (the same point was made in a review by Holmquist Olausson, 2002).

This is not a far-fetched notion, as we already know that her type III objects share several features in common with other artefact types. Looking first at the basket-like 'handles', we can note that almost identical constructions are found as the handles of certain types of Viking-Age keys (cf. Aanestad 2004 and Berg 2015 for wider, gendered discussions of these objects). The keys of this type are mostly from Gotland (Fig. 3.79), and examples are known from Rangsarve in Alva parish, Fjäle in Anga, an unknown find-spot in Björke parish, Hanes in Endre, Hallvands in Garda, Hägvards in Hall, Hallegårde in Halla, an unknown find-spot in Hejde parish, Vägome in Lärbro, and an unknown find-spot in Rute parish (Thunmark-Nylén 1998: pl. 207ff; 2000: 33, 40, 60, 140, 223, 311, 347, 377, 495, 607). Another example was found in the Mästermyr tool-chest

(Arwidsson & Berg 1983: 9, pl. 19), and a superbly-preserved tenth-or eleventh-century key of this type has been found at the Viking-Age trading centre of Bandlundeviken, also on Gotland (Brandt 2002: 252, 298; Fig. 3.80).

The terminals of the keys would seem to ostensibly support the idea that the openwork device really was the handle of the staffs, and that they were thus held at one end rather as one would grip a sword. However, some of the staffs themselves give the lie to this, for example that from Søreim in Norway, which has an openwork 'basket' far too broad for any but the largest hand to grasp. Added to this, an iron rod held in a fire would grow hot, and thus perhaps require insulation to pick up – this would add to the bulk of the 'handle', and make it even harder to hold. A good guide to a comfortable grip in the Viking Age, at least for men, can be found in the hilts of swords. When compared, it is immediately clear that several of the staff 'handles' exceed these dimensions. When one also considers that women tend to have smaller hands than men, the disparity increases. The Klinta staff is different again, as its 'basket' is not only even broader than that from Søreim but is not situated at the end of the object. What then do the 'handles' mean? Do the strands of metal forming the 'basket' signify anything?

One possible symbolic indicator can be found in an iron object of a similar construction from Gävle in Gästrikland, Sweden, now stored in the National Museum in København (Brøndsted 1936: 196f; Pentz *et al.* 2009: 224f; Gardeła 2012: 67ff, 2016: 334f; Fig. 3.81). The artefact was found in a male grave with a sword, arrows and jewellery, and is usually interpreted as the shank of a dog-whip. It measures 0.48 m long, with a 0.12 m 'basket' at one end, which is topped with a semi-spherical terminal. Below, the 'basket' leads into the straight shaft with a gaping animal head, almost identical to those on the Klinta staff and on that from Bj. 760. The shaft terminates in a polyhedral knob and a flat plate on which hangs a ring, with two double spirals and a loop to take the leather thong. Despite similar finds in Finland and Sweden (*ibid*: 196), there is no certainty that this object has been correctly interpreted, and the 'rattles' on the loop could equally imply a magical function (or a combination, as such rattles are common features

of horse harness and other objects in the Viking Age, and are found as far away as Ladoga; Brandenburga 1895: pl. IX). The resemblance to the staffs is very striking – the piece from Gävle may even *be* a staff – and adds yet another confusing dimension to these objects.

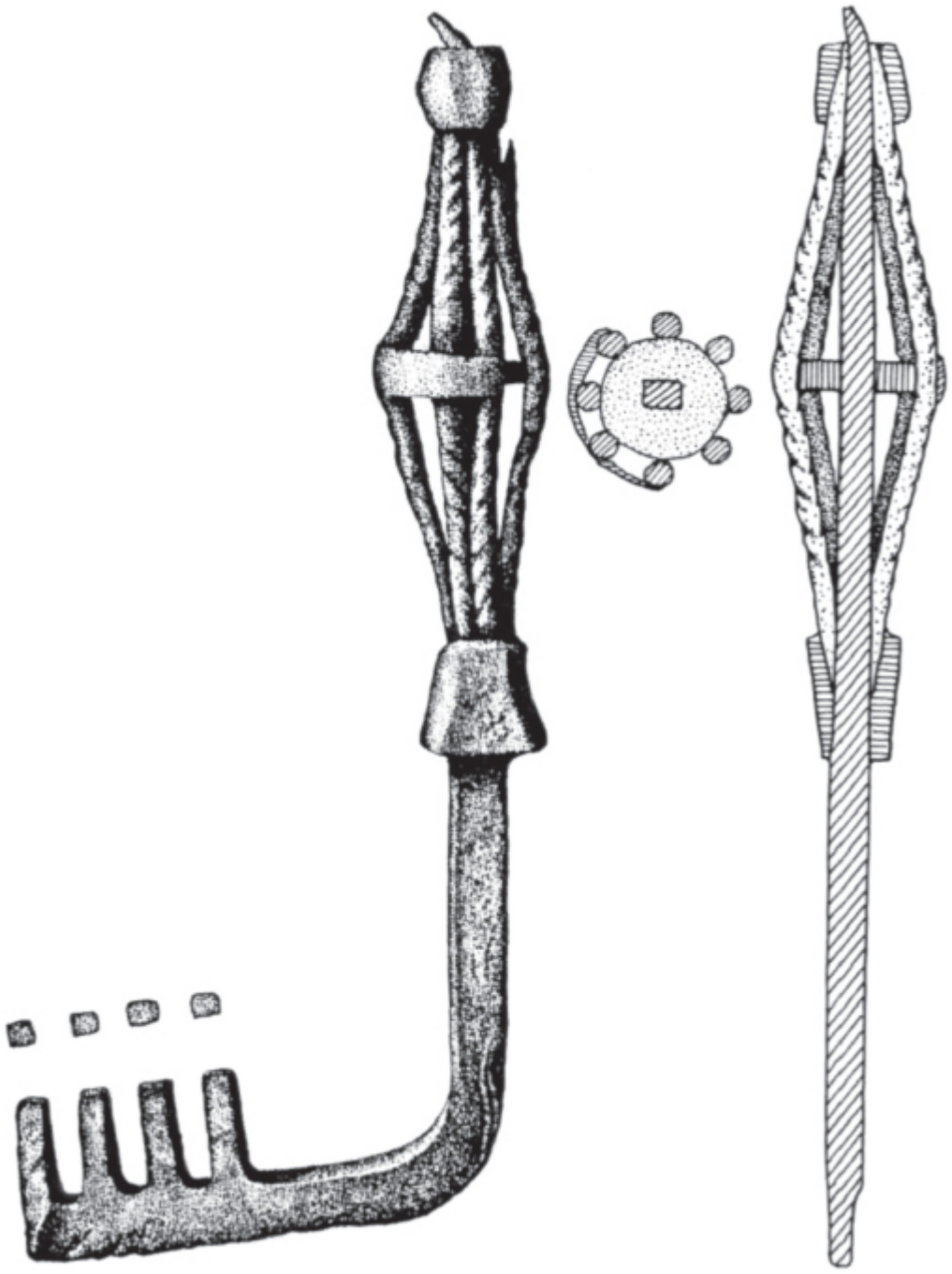


Fig. 3.79 One of the iron keys found in the tool-chest from Mästermyr on Gotland, with a handle similar to the 'basket' feature on possible staffs of

sorcery. The detail of its construction is clearly shown, with bronze disks and terminals, and is identical to that on the 'handles' of the staffs (after Arwidsson & Berg 1983: pl. 19; drawing by Janis Cirulis).



Fig. 3.80 The iron key with bronze fittings from Bandlundeviken, Gotland, with a 'basket' handle of the same type as the possible staffs of sorcery. The superb preservation gives an idea of how impressive the staffs would originally have looked (after Brandt 2002: 298).

A further parallel for the 'basket' construction comes from two remarkable iron chains found in the Oseberg ship burial, in which the links of the chain are each formed like the 'handle' of the staffs (Brøgger & Shetelig 1928: 136). Though lacking the central rod which forms the shaft of the staffs, the chain links are each made of four twisted strands of iron with terminal knobs at the top and bottom, fixed by loops to the next link in the chain. It is worth emphasising that on this object the 'basket' form clearly has no handle-like functions at all. As we shall see below, the chains were found in a chest which also contained a possible staff of sorcery, though made of wood.

Similar parallels can be found for the polyhedral knobs on the shafts of the staffs, as these are essentially the same as a common form of weight found throughout the Viking world – even the different types of knobs reflect the typologies of weights (see Arbman 1940: pl. 127; Kyhlberg 1980b: 220). In a further connection, these same kinds of polyhedral knobs

are occasionally also found on the key handles, as in the example from Rute parish on Gotland.

In my opinion it is these knobs and shaft mounts that also finally dispel the meat spit argument for at least some of Bøgh-Andersen's type III-M objects. The knobs along the length of the shaft are very substantial, and completely prevent joints of meat from being pushed along the full length of the object. In purely functional terms the staffs therefore cannot be used as meat spits – they simply do not work for this purpose. The only means of using them in food preparation would be to pierce a piece of food on the very point of the shaft and then somehow hold it in a fire, rather in the manner that one toasts marshmallows on a stick.

Those who advocate the meat spit interpretation have also focused on the presence of kitchen implements in the graves, which are claimed as support for the identification of the objects as roasting implements (Petersen was the first to do this, 1951: 428, and Bøgh-Andersen follows this line throughout her 1999 thesis). This argument does not stand up to closer inspection, however, since the kitchen implements of course prove nothing in themselves. They are only of relevance to the staffs if the meat spit interpretation is accepted in advance. This becomes obvious if we consider finds of kitchen utensils in relation to other objects whose function we understand – thus the presence of a frying pan does not 'prove' that a sword or a comb was used in the kitchen, but we can only say this because we can immediately recognise the latter objects for what they are, which is not the case with the staffs.





Fig. 3.81 The Viking Age iron ‘whip shank’ from Gävle, Gästrikland, Sweden, with a ‘basket handle’ (photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark).

This is not to say that the staffs do not *resemble* meat spits, and other objects, for they certainly do. However, in this context it is worth considering our frames of reference in relation to those of the Viking Age – perhaps the keys, weights and meat spits imitated the staffs, rather than *vice versa*.

To this can be added the variety of embellishments to the ‘basket’ constructions: the loops beneath the model house on the Klinta staff; the perforated attachments to the knobs on the Birka staffs; the spirals and nails on the Jägarbacken and Kilmainham pieces discussed below, like the perforation on the staff from Aska, and so on. Another curious feature of several of the staffs is the presence of one or more rings attached to the ‘handle’. In some of the simpler examples a single ring is present and has

been interpreted as a suspension loop for storing the object hanging up, but on other staffs – such as that from Kvåle – there are two rings. The staff from Nordfjord has a ring hanging from each strand of the 'basket' construction. It seems unlikely that these are purely for suspension, and on some staffs the rings are decorated further: the Søreim piece, for example, has a Þórr's hammer attached to it. All these features again imply that the staffs are special objects, and not least that they are even less likely to have been used as meat spits.

As noted in the preface, the bulk of the text in this second edition deliberately preserves the flow of the original. To this end, the subsequent and very exciting body of work by Eldar Heide (2006a–c) is reviewed in chapter 8; suffice to say here that I believe he has resolved the nature and meaning of the 'handle' construction beyond reasonable doubt.

Considering all these problems, within Bøgh-Andersen's type III we can therefore isolate not two but actually four categories:

- staffs without an expanded 'handle' construction
- staffs with an expanded 'handle' construction
- staffs with an expanded 'handle' construction and mounts or knobs on the shaft
- staffs without an expanded 'handle' construction but with mounts or knobs on the shaft

In addition, we can note that there is a large variation in the types of 'handles', shafts and shaft mounts. In considering these objects as possible staffs of sorcery, we must consider not only the written sources but also the graves in which each individual staff was found. In this light I would suggest that we convert the four above categories into the following three interpretations:

- very probable staff of sorcery: mounts or knobs on the shaft, with or without expanded 'handle' construction
- probable staff of sorcery: expanded 'handle' construction
- possible staff of sorcery: simple 'handle' demarcation

We can review this in the context of the Birka staffs, and ask if we can see them as symbols of high status. Following his argument that the staffs were for measurement, Kyhlberg (1980b: 275) suggests that graves Bj. 760 (660 as he thought), 834 and 845 together build a generational pattern of 'offi ce-holders', and that the staff as volumetric measure was a symbol of considerable status – perhaps a female equivalent to male graves with balances. It is unclear how this view might change given that Bj. 760 is a cremation, but perhaps it would simply add a fourth individual to Kyhlberg's model. As noted above, my interpretation of the burials' relative chronology differs from Kyhlberg's, because of his separation of the two individuals in Bj. 834; he assigns the staff to the man, which he sees as the earlier of the two. Following my view of the graves' dating, there is no 'generational sequence', but the idea of the staff as a symbol of great dignity could apply equally well to a sorceress as to a person with control over economic functions. One could also argue that both textile-rules and volumetric measures could be seen as rather mundane objects, of which we might expect to find more examples. Both functions might carry a degree of social status in their performance, but hardly at the level implied by the burial contexts of the objects in question. By contrast, this would not be the case if the staffs were tools of sorcery – all the circumstantial evidence of the graves fits such an interpretation without diffi culty.

Before examining the other Scandinavian staffs, it is worth devoting a few words to the original appearance of the examples from Birka, Klinta and Fyrkat. As always with archaeological finds, the condition of the objects when found makes it hard to visualise how they once looked when new, but in the case of the staffs we should focus especially on the bronze mounts. When first made and polished, these would have gleamed almost like gold, standing out very dramatically against the dark iron of the shafts, especially if the latter had been blacked. An exact reproduction of the Klinta staff has been made for the National Museum of Antiquities in Stockholm, and an examination of this makes very clear the original magnificence of these pieces (see Lamm 2002; Fig. 3.82). This gives a quite different appearance to the 'handle' constructions and the knob-mounts on the shafts, and can only increase the likelihood that these were objects of some dignity.

Other Scandinavian staffs

In addition to the examples from Birka, Klinta and Fyrkat, iron staffs of the kinds described above are known from 20 burials in Scandinavia dating to the eighth to tenth centuries, with 12 more from stray finds. It should be noted that for the Norwegian finds especially, Gardeła (2016: 55f) strongly disagrees with my inclusion of some items in my lists of staffs. I refer the reader to his objections for the close detail, but suffi ce to say that in a couple of cases I stand corrected, while in the others I hold to my original view, each explained on an individual basis below. Some of the objects he identifies as staffs, such as those from Gerdrup and Trekroner-Grydehøj, I do not find convincing (see chapter 8), while my catalogue here includes several that he omits altogether. It is interesting – and somehow appropriate for these diffi cult objects – that even after two decades of work, the two scholars who have most closely focussed on the staffs and their analogues do not agree on a final corpus.



Fig. 3.82 A reconstruction of the Klinta staff; note that the shaft of the original was longer (photo Oskar Kullander, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

By my reckoning, three other iron staffs have been found in Iceland and Finland (the Icelandic examples again contested by Gardeła, *ibid*). In addition to these, five are known from outside Scandinavia, and there are at least four wooden staffs that may belong to this broad category; these are considered separately below (Fig. 3.83). As discussed below, the bulk of the staffs have been catalogued as meat spits by Bøgh-Andersen (1999), working from Petersen's survey of Viking-Age tools (1951: 421–30).

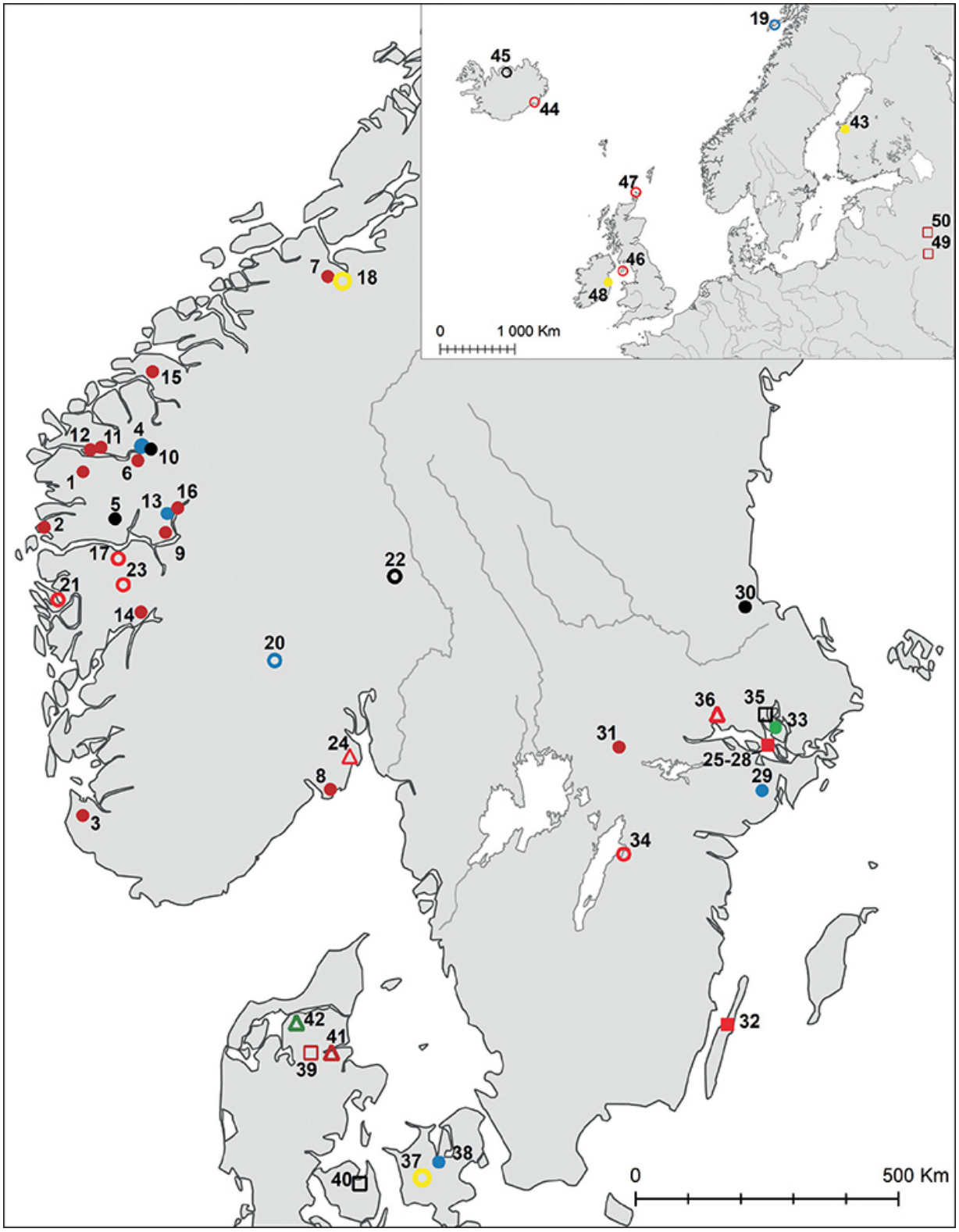


Fig. 3.83. Find-spots of possible staffs of sorcery from the Viking world (partially based on underlays after Susanne Bøgh-Andersen 1999;

originally mapped by Karin Bengtsson 2002; updated by the author, and map created by Daniel Löwenborg, 2018).

- circle = iron staff without shaft mounts
- square = iron staff with shaft mounts
- triangle = wooden staff
- solid symbol = staff with an expanded ‘handle’
- open symbol = staff or shaft without an expanded ‘handle’
- black = burial determined as male
- red = burial determined as female
- yellow = burial without sex determination
- blue = stray find
- green = ritual deposit

Location key
Norway:
1.Arnestad, Sogn og Fjordane
2.Fure, Sogn og Fjordane
3.Gausel, Rogaland
4.Gutdalen Stryn, Sogn og Fjordane
5.Hellebust, Sogn og Fjordane
6.Hilde, Sogn og Fjordane
7.Huseby, Sør-Trøndelag
8.Kaupang, Vestfold
9.Kvåle, Sogn og Fjordane
10. Mindre-Sunde, Sogn og Fjordane
11. Myklebostad, Sogn og Fjordane
12. Nordfjord, Sogn og Fjordane
13. Søreim, Sogn og Fjordane
14. Trå, Hordaland
15. Villa farm, Møre og Rogndal
16. Øvre Høvum, Sogn og Fjordane
17. Hopperstad, Sogn og Fjordane

18. Melhus, Trøndelag
19. Steine, Nordland
20. Tveiten, Buskerud
21. Vatne, Hordaland
22. Vestre Berg, Hedmark
23. Veka, Hordaland

24. Oseberg, Vestfold

Sweden:

25. Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 660.*
26. Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 760
27. Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 834
28. Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 845
29. Gnesta, Södermanland
30. Gävle, Gästrikland
31. Jägarbacken, Närke
32. Klinta, Öland

33. Lilla Ullevi, Uppland

34. Aska, Östergötland 35. Tuna i Hjelsta, Uppland

36. Tuna i Badelunda, Västmanland

Denmark:

37. Fuldby, Sjælland

38. Lejre, Sjælland*

39. Fyrkat, Jylland

40. Ladby, Fyn
41. Fyrkat, Jylland

42. Hemdrup, Jylland

Finland:

43. Pukkila-Isokyrö, Vasa

Iceland:

44. Álaugarey-Nesjahreppur

45. Stærri-Árskógur

Isle of Man:

46. Peel Castle, St. Patrick’s isle
Orkney:

47. Pierowall, Westray

Ireland:

48. Kilmainham, Dublin

Russia:

49. Gnezdovo, Smolensk
50. Lake Zelikovje, Tver
* *the expanded ‘handle’ on these objects is assumed by association with similar finds, but not proven.*

Not shown: one unprovenanced iron staff with expanded 'handle' construction from Norway.

We can review them here by type and country. All the following entries describe burials with staffs of the stated kind, with full descriptions in cases where the graves have been published (again augmented with reference to the new catalogue in Gardeła 2016). If no reports were made (*i.e.* for entries below that include no information other than dating, location and the sex of the burial), for more information the reader is referred to the nineteenth-century accession registers of the relevant museums, references for which are given below.

Staffs with expanded 'handle' constructions
These objects have been found as follows:

Norway

- Female burials (note: all sex determinations have been claimed by the respective excavators solely through artefactual association, and are thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Fure – Askvoll sogn, Sogn og Fjordane
    - A square-section iron staff, some 0.84 m long, with a 'handle' construction. Found in an unmarked chamber grave with items of conventionally female jewellery and household equipment. Dated before 800 (ÅFNF 1893: 148; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 96ff, 2016: 290f).
  - Huseby – Børseskogn sogn, Sør-Trøndelag
    - Damaged iron staff, 1.04 m in length, probably originally longer; second half of the ninth century (TVSS 1908/14: 13; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f)
  - Trå – Granvin sogn, Hordaland
    - A mound inhumation, presumed to be female on the basis of numerous items of jewellery. The grave included a rich array of textile-working equipment and kitchen implements – one of the reasons why the staff has earlier been interpreted as a meat spit. Only the lowest terminal of the 'handle' is preserved, but by

comparison with more complete examples the staff appears to have had a ‘basket’ construction (Gardeła disagrees, 2016: 55f, 316). It has recently been argued that the burial is that of a female cult leader, possibly a *gyðja* – an intepretation that would fit well with the presence of the staff (Kaland 2006; cf. Gardeła 2016: 60–3). The surviving staff fragment measures 0.88 m in length and was originally longer; first half of the tenth century (BMÅ 1913/14: 45; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2016: 316f).

- Arnestad – Gjemmestad sogn, Sogn og Fjordane
  - A cremation under a layer of birch bark and a mound, the human remains largely interred in an iron cauldron. The remains were artefactually sexed as female due to the presence of oval brooches, textile-working equipment and cooking implements. Dated to the tenth century (BMÅ 1924–25/2: 37; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 78ff, 2016: 288f).
- Hilde – Innvik sogn, Sogn og Fjordane
  - A cremation burial under a mound, with weaving equipment and an array of household items suggesting an artefactual female sex determination. The grave also included a complex amulet with nine Þórr’s hammers. An important burial for the interpretation of the staffs, because in addition to the 0.95 m-long ‘basket’ type noted here the grave also included a true meat spit formed as a fork (Bøgh-Andersen’s type I). Tools are rarely duplicated in Viking-Age graves, and this provides further indication that the ‘basket’ staffs are *not* meat spits; tenth century (BMÅ 1901/12: 25; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 90ff, 2016: 298f).
- Kvåle – Stedie sogn, Sogn og Fjordane
  - A cremation burial under a stone cairn, the latter also containing burnt bone. Household items, textile-working equipment and ‘female’ jewellery provide an artefactual sex determination. A complete, slightly bent iron staff with outstanding preservation,

*c.*0.8 m long, with two possible suspension rings above the ‘basket’, and indentations on each side of the knobs that adorn it; the purpose of these is not known; tenth century (ÅFNF 1880: 241f; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 75ff, 2016: 302f).

- Myklebostad – Eid sogn, Sogn og Fjordane (Figs 3.84, 3.85)
  - A cremation under a mound, with the artefactually-sexed remains of a woman who had been burnt together with a dog and a chicken in a small boat, the ashes of which had been collected from the pyre and transported to the site of the burial. The grave-goods included textile-working implements, cooking accessories, jewellery and beads, and the remains of at least one wooden box with iron mounts; a single bronze ring may have been meant for the big toe, the only comparable example to the toe-rings from Fyrkat 4. A small dog and a chicken had also been present on the pyre. The staff found was well-preserved, 0.88 m in length and 2 cm thick with a square cross-section. The ‘basket’ construction had two polyhedral terminals, and a ring at one end. Most of the grave-goods were piled randomly in the northwest part of the cremation layer, and the excavator noted how the staff had been placed apart from them in the northeast part of the ashes. A male warrior grave had been cut into the upper levels of the mound after the main interment, and was probably a later, secondary burial. The woman’s grave can be dated to the tenth century (BMÅ 1903/3: 21; Shetelig 1905, 1912: 188–94; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 81ff, 2016: 306f).

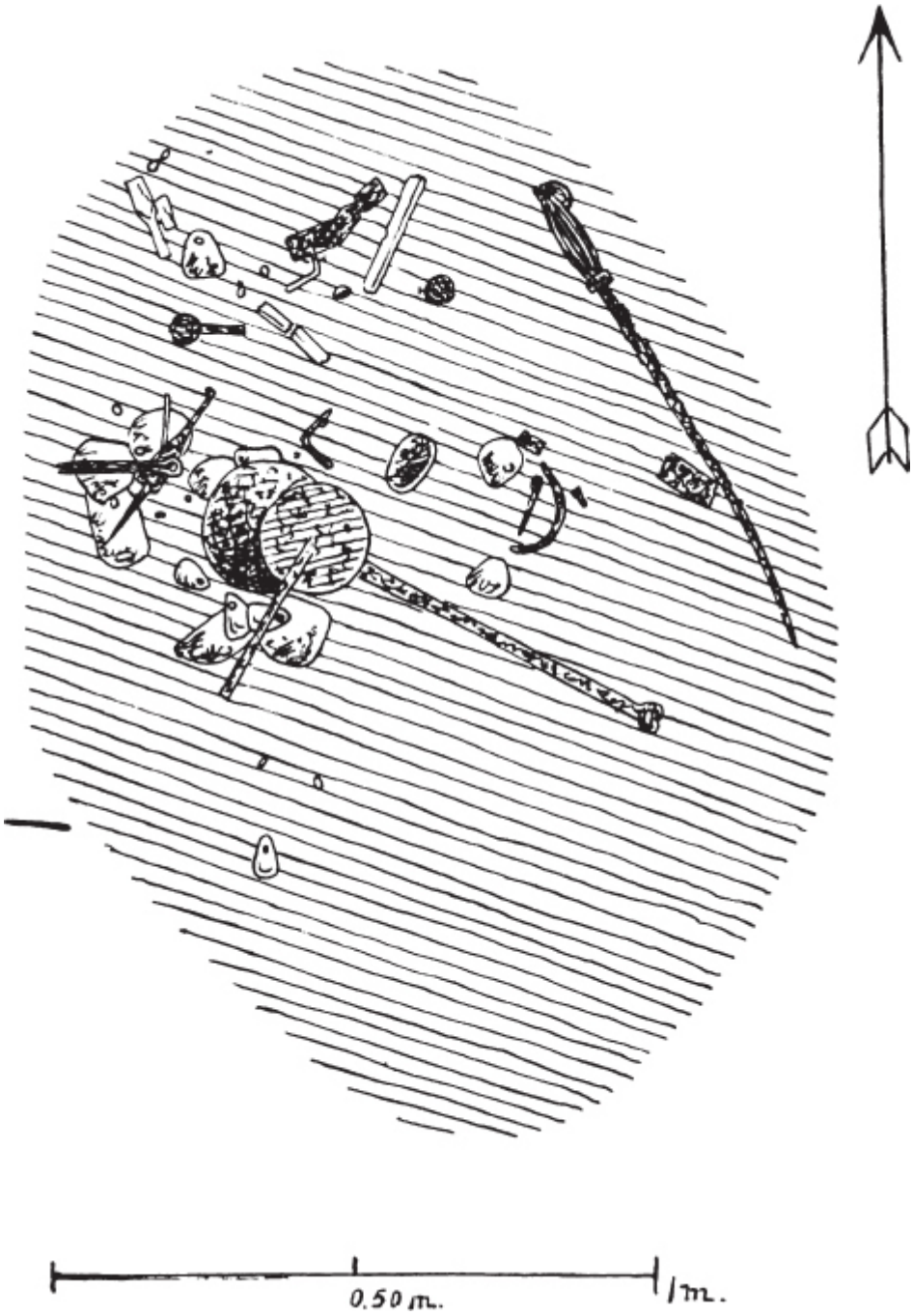


Fig. 3.84 Plan of the burial in mound 4 at Myklebostad, Eid sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (after Shetelig 1912: 191).





Fig. 3.85 The staff from the burial in mound 4 at Myklebostad, Eid sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (after Shetelig 1912: 193).

- Nordfjord – Sogn og Fjordane
  - Tenth-century iron staff, with an iron ring hanging from the terminal end of each strand in the 'basket' construction. (BMÅ 1904/6: 26; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f).
- Øvre Høvum – Nes sogn, Sogn og Fjordane
  - A flat cremation, dated to the tenth century and artefactually sexed as female due to the presence of textile-working equipment and household items. The staff is 0.91 m long, square in section and slightly bent (BMT 1919: 44; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 93ff, 2016: 310f).
- Villa Farm – Vestnes sogn, Møre og Rogndal
  - Found in an 8 m-diameter mound on a sandbank some 22 m from the sea, in connection with a cremation urn, the staff is exceptionally large at 0.9 m long, with its tip deliberately bent. The burial also contained significant numbers of high-status objects, presumed to be associated with women: a pair of fine-quality oval brooches, beads including silver examples, an ornamented comb, a whalebone plaque and weaving batten, a sickle and shears of iron, m fragments of a whetstone, a wooden box, and a ceramic urn. The mound was excavated in 1894 and not well recorded, but it seems to have included a harnessed horse and quite possibly the remains of a cremated boat (Villa 1894; Brunning 2016; Gardeła 2016: 346 records this item as unprovenanced, but I am grateful to Barry

Ager and Sue Brunning for their pers.comm. with further details on this burial).

- Male burials (note: all sex determinations have been claimed by the respective excavators solely through artefactual association, and are thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Hellebust – Vik sogn, Sogn and Fjordane
    - A poorly documented mound burial, though whether inhumation or cremation is unknown. The grave contained a full array of weapons, together with horse quipment, and was thus provisionally sexed as male. Only the lowest terminal of the 'handle' is preserved, but it is unclear whether an 'expanded' frame was present (Gardeła thinks not, and suggests that what I see as the lower part of a 'handle' is instead a mount on the shaft – 2016: 55f, 296). I retain its classification here, but it must be reagrded as very tentative; eighth century (Nicolaysen 1862– 66: 487; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 102ff, 2016: 296f).
  - Mindre-Sunde – Nedstryn sogn, Sogn and Fjordane
    - A stone-lined flat 'grave' construction, without any preserved human remains; an abundance of weapons suggests that the deceased was male. The staff is preserved to a length of 0.83 m and is in poor condition. My own examinations suggest that a 'handle' was present, though now badly damaged; Gardeła again disgrees (2016: 55f, 304), but as above I provisionally retain its original classification. Eighth century? (ÅFNF 1887: 119; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 99ff, 2016: 304f).
- Stray finds, probably from burials
  - Søreim – Dael sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (Figs 3.86)
    - Iron staff with a very broad four-strand 'basket', linked by a thin horizontal plate at the centre of the 'handle'. The latter terminates in a ring on which is threaded a Þórr's hammer. The staff is 0.96 m long and can be dated to the Viking Age without further precision

(ÅFNF 1872: 68; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 84ff, 2016: 314f).

- Gutdalen Stryn – Sogn og Fjordane
  - A very long staff, *c.*1 m, located by Gardeła in Bergen Museum. Bent almost double, and with an elaborate ‘handle’ of 6 rods to which are affixed 5 rings – a truly exceptional example, but unfortunately without context (Gardeła 2012: 87ff, 2016: 294f).
- Norway – unprovenanced
  - A very crudely made iron staff, found bent round in a curve and with the point missing. Its present length is approximately 0.35 m, with a square-section shaft up to 1.5 cm thick. The ‘handle’ is made from four strands of iron, bowed around the central shaft and joined at both ends by a disk of iron approximately 2.5 cm in diameter and 1 cm thick. The disk nearest the terminal of the ‘handle’ also has a thin band of iron wound tightly across its width at one point. From this disk also projects a flattened loop of iron, with an eye perhaps 3 mm in diameter. The staff is of undetermined Viking-Age date (Undset 1878: 81; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2016: 345ff).





Fig. 3.86 The staff from Søreim, Dael sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (after Petersen 1951: 423).

Sweden

- Female burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Jägarbacken – Ånste sn, Närke (Figs 3.87, 3.88)
    - Grave 15 from the Jägarbacken cemetery, in which the cremated remains of a woman (suggested by the presence of an extensive jewellery set and dress accessories) had been buried in two pottery vessels placed on the ashes of the pyre. The deceased had been burnt with a full complement of brooches, beads and personal items such as a comb and shears, and it seems that a horse was also cremated together with a set of draught harness. The grave also contained an iron staff, which was 0.81 m long with a 0.15 m 'basket' and two ornamented bronze terminal knobs. The latter were augmented by small bronze spirals attached so as to stand proud of the shaft, and the end of the 'handle' had been hammered into an oval plate through which a nail had been fixed; the purpose of these embellishments is unknown. The staff had not been burnt on the pyre, but had instead been thrust vertically into the ashes surrounding the woman's bones; around the staff two unburnt oval brooches had been placed. The whole deposit, including the staff and brooches, was then covered by an earthen mound. The grave can be dated to the tenth century (Hanson 1983: 8, 24; Bøgh-

Andersen 1999: 82f; Graner 2007: 52–61; Gardeła 2012: 54ff, 2016: 338–41).

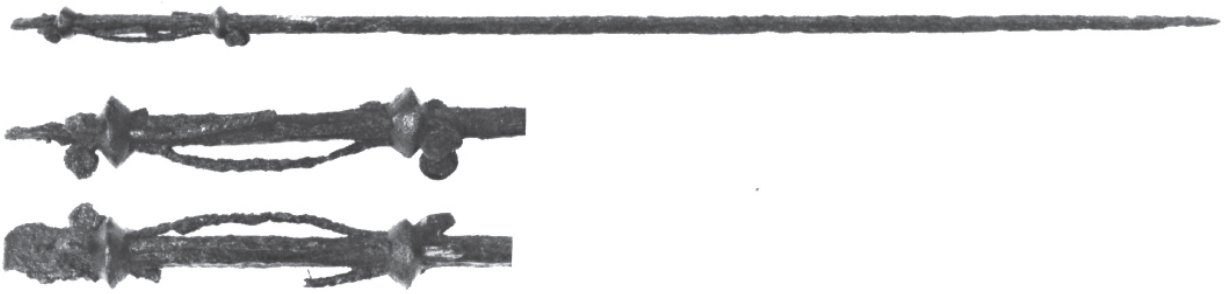


Fig. 3.87 The iron staff from the Jägarbacken cemetery in Närke, with details of its ‘handle’. Note the spirals around the terminal knobs, and the flattened plate at the end (after Hanson 1983: 24).

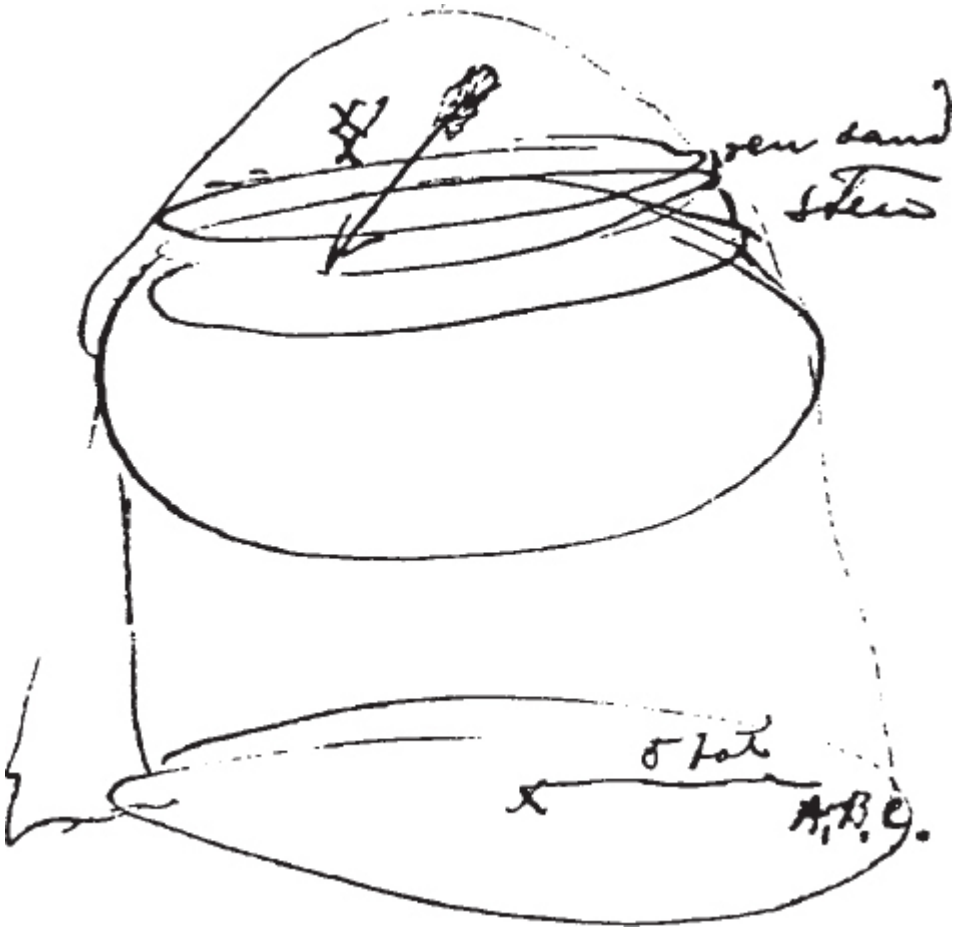


Fig. 3.88 Contemporary sketch of the cremation deposit of grave 15 at the Jägarbacken cemetery in Närke, investigated in 1896 by Emil Ekhoff. The

layer marked ren sand, sten *('pure sand, stone') covered the cremation, and the arrow-like mark above indicates how the iron staff was standing vertically in it, with the mound built up on top (after Hanson 1983: 8).*



Fig. 3.89 Detail of the 'handle' on the staff from Gnesta in Södermanland (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 83; drawing by Håkan Dahl, used by kind permission).

- Stray finds and settlement deposits
  - Gnesta – Södermanland (Fig. 3.89)
    - Found in 1892 somewhere in the vicinity of the railway station, the Gnesta staff was 0.66 m long, with a 0.15 cm 'basket handle' incorporating particularly richly decorated bronze knobs at each end. Viking Age (Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 83f; Gardeła 2012: 58ff, 2016: 336f).
  - Lilla Ullevi, Bro sn, Uppland
    - Excavated from deposits associated with a ritual structure, interpreted as a *horgr* offering platform, this fragmentary object appears as the expanded 'handle' section of a staff. Four twisted iron rods are preserved, with a single mount holding them together at one end; the rest of the object is broken off. There is a possibility that this is the remains of a key, of the kind reviewed above and with a specific parallel in a similar context from Gamla Uppsala (Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2017: 198–201; Eriksson 2018: 283f). However, its proximity to what the excavators have tentatively identified as a *seiðhjallr* merits its inclusion here as a tentative staff of sorcery (Bäck *et al.* 2008: 53f; Gardeła 2016: 345ff). A second fragment of iron rod with an unusual but plain 'handle'-like

terminal resembling that from Fyrkat, found in a different and much later context at the same site, does not seem convincing to me (Bäck *et al.* 2008: 54; Gardeła 2016: 345ff).

Denmark

- Burial of indeterminate sex?
  - Fuldby – Bjernede sn, Sorø amt (Fig. 3.90)
    - Found in 1868, probably in a heavily disturbed grave under a large stone, originally thought to be the burial of a man due to the find of a stirrup (now lost) but it is also likely that the finds represent the disturbed remains of several burials; there is therefore no basis on which to make even a preliminary sex determination of the presumed grave. The staff has a 'basket handle' with twisted iron rods in the cage, with corroded terminal mounts of which at least one seems to represent a beast's head. Tenth century (Brøndsted 1936: 196f; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 52; Pentz *et al.* 2009: 224f; Gardeła 2012: 31f, 2016: 272f).

Finland

- Burial of indeterminate sex
  - Pukkila-Isokyrö, Vasa län (Fig. 3.91)
    - A richly-furnished boat cremation, redeposited in a pit on a flat-ground cemetery. New analysis of the bones suggests that the boat contained at least two individuals of indeterminate sex, one aged 10–24 and other 18–44. Finds of helmet, shield, sword and scabbard, spear, arrows, axe, scramasax, knife, toilet implements, cooking implements and agricultural tools. Conventionally the artefact assemblage might be sexed as male, but this is highly uncertain and the burial contained at least two people. The grave has been preliminarily dated to the eighth century (*contra* Gardeła, 2016: 345). The staff is broken a short distance below the 'basket' feature and has been consistently interpreted as a meat spit; its solid square section suggests that it *is* a staff, and not a broken-off key (Hackman 1938: 154f; Kivikoski 1973: 88, taf. 71; Bøgh-

Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2016: 345ff; see also discussions in Wessman 2010).

Staffs without expanded 'handle' constructions

These objects have been found as follows:

Norway

- Female burials (note: all sex determinations have been claimed by the respective excavators solely through artefactual association, and are thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Hopperstad – Vik sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (Fig. 3.92)
    - A probable cremation in a boat, though poorly recorded. A finely-wrought staff with a decorated bronze 'handle', accompanying a woman (artefactually sexed through jewellery and household items). The burial was exceptionally rich, and dated *c.*900. It included western European bronze vessels and glass, and bronze-mounted buckets (ÅFNF 1887: 125; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Sørheim 2011; Gardeła 2012: 117f, 2016: 75f, 300f).





Fig. 3.90 The staff from Fuldby, Bjernede on Sjælland (photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark).



Fig. 3.91 The staff from Pukkila-Isokyrö, Vasa län, Finland (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 52; drawing by Håkan Dahl, used by kind permission).





Fig. 3.92 The iron staff with bronze ‘handle’ from Hopperstad, Viks sogn, Sogn and Fjordane (after Petersen 1951: 423).

- Veka – Vangen sogn, Hordaland (Figs 3.93–3.96)
  - A complex, artefactually-sexed female inhumation, constructed in several distinct phases. On a southwest-facing slope above a river and overlooking a ford, a gently trapezoidal grave measuring 2.7 × 1 m had been cut 0.45 m deep into the sandy sub-soil. The grave had then been completely lined and floored with wooden planks. The resulting ‘box’ had then been lined with bark which had in turn been partly covered by textiles (perhaps a blanket?), on which the dead woman had been laid with her grave-goods. After the interment had been completed, the grave was sealed with a wooden lid, also lined with bark. This was then covered by large stone slabs piled irregularly over the grave. Above this had been raised a stone cairn, and finally a covering mound of earth 30 m in diameter, carefully built into the contour of the slope which had been dug away on the upper side to make the barrow a more imposing monument. The woman had been buried on her side, with a rich collection of jewellery – two oval brooches of type P51 B1, a bronze brooch, several necklaces with more than 100 beads in total, and arm-rings. Round her neck lay 16 beads individually strung on thin silver rings – either a remarkable necklace, or

perhaps sewn onto her clothes. An Anglo-Saxon coin of Offa, already very old when buried in the grave, had been laid in the coffin behind her head. The Veka woman also had with her a sickle, comb, knife, and items for sewing and textile-working, several of them collected in a large box which had been placed at the foot of the grave. Aligned with the centre of the grave with its 'handle' at a level with the woman's waist, lay a 0.74 m iron staff with polyhedral knobs. The two armrings were found on top of the 'handle', implying that the woman had been buried with her hands folded over the staff. The grave dates from the tenth century, and I here employ Shetelig's early spelling of the place-name, an alternative to Veke (BMÅ 1909/14: 25; Shetelig 1912: 206–10; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 108f, 2016: 320f).

- Vatne – Seim sogn, Hordaland
  - A cremation under a low mound, artefactually sexed as female due to the presence of textile-working implements and jewellery. Only the lowest terminal of the 'handle' is preserved, and the shaft is noticeably bent. In the first edition I classified this as having a fragmentary 'expanded handle' construction, but following Gardeła's observations (2016: 55f) I agree with him that this was probably not present and the staff has therefore been reclassified here; tenth century (ÅFNF 1879: 242; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f; Gardeła 2012: 111ff, 2016: 318f).

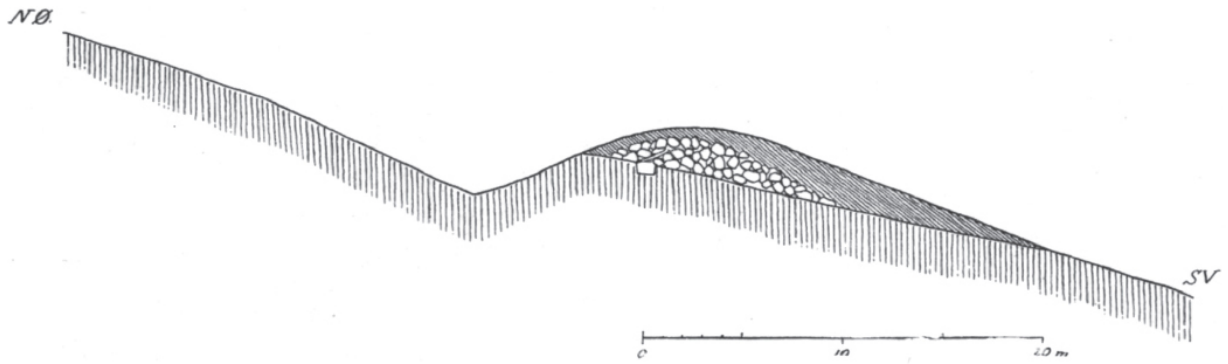


Fig. 3.93 A northeast–southwest section through the grave from Veka in Vangen sogn, Hordaland, showing the location of the burial mound on a gentle slope; the inner grave construction can be clearly seen (after Shetelig 1912: 207).

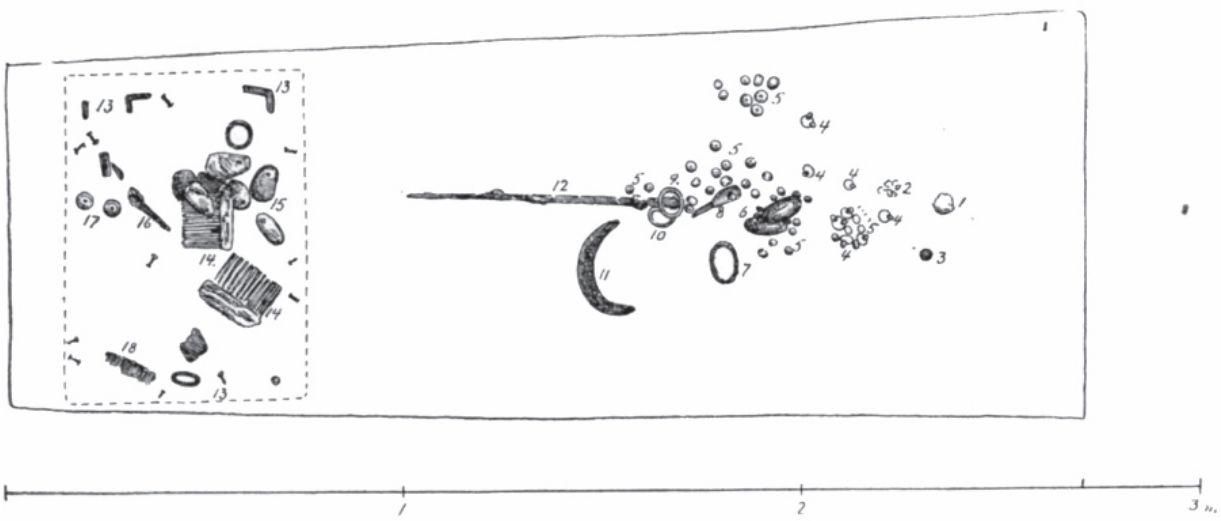


Fig. 3.94 Plan of the inhumation at Veka, Vangen sogn, Hordaland (after Shetelig 1912: 207).

- Male burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - V. Berg – Løten sogn, Hedmark
    - A poorly documented burial, producing a damaged staff, perhaps with a suspension ring, from the first half of the tenth century (ÅFNF 1887: 85; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f).
- Double burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Melhus – northern Trøndelag
    - A high-status boat burial under a mound, set within a small barrow cemetery. No human remains were preserved, but from the

artefactual assemblage it has been suggested that it originally contained a man and a woman. The grave included a full set of weaponry, a rare insular reliquary, a range of expensive jewellery, and a half-metre fragment of a square-section iron rod. Once seen as a roasting spit, following the arguments of this book's first edition the object has recently been reinterpreted as a staff, and the Melhus woman is now viewed as a 'mistress of the cult' with her 'ritual tools' (Petersen 1907; Heen-Pettersen & Murray 2018: 73ff).

- Stray finds, probably from burials
  - Steine – Bø sogn, Nordland
    - A finely-made staff with biconical knobs on the

'handle'; unspecified Viking-Age date (Nicolaissen 1903: 11; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f).

  - Tveiten – Veggli sogn, Buskerud
    - A well-preserved, complete staff 0.82 m long, with a 16.5 cm 'handle' demarcated by two knobs with quadriform projecting points. From the terminal knob projects a flattened plate of iron with a pierced hole, in which hangs an undecorated iron ring 6.5 cm in diameter. The staff is of indeterminate Viking-Age date (Undset 1888: 29; Petersen 1951: 426ff; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 47f).



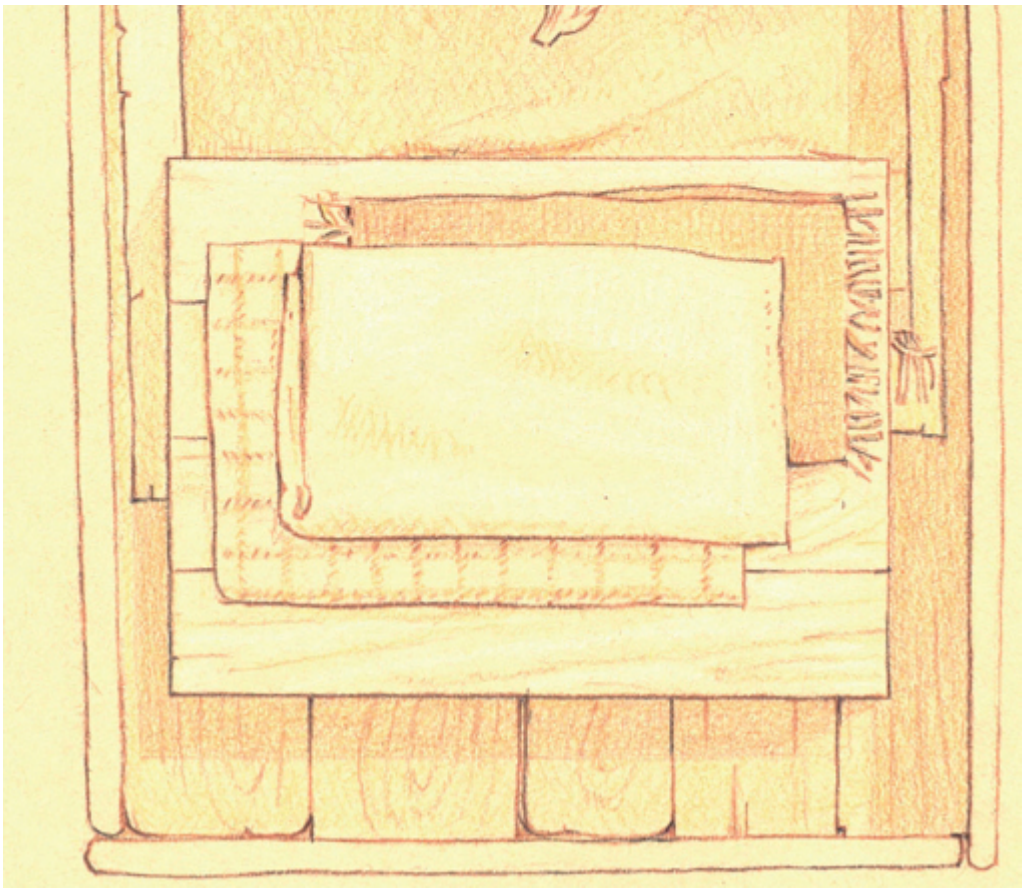


Fig. 3.95 Reconstruction of the inhumation at Veka, Vangen sogn, Hordaland as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed (drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson).





Fig. 3.96 The staff from the inhumation at Veka, Vangen sogn, Hordaland (after Shetelig 1912: 210).

Sweden

- Female burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Aska – Hagebyhöga sn, Östergötland (Fig. 3.97)
    - The iron staff measured 0.72 m in length, its ‘handle’ being effectively an extension of the shaft, though somewhat thicker and delineated by two polyhedral iron knobs at the top and bottom. The end of the staff above the ‘handle’ terminates in a flattened iron plate, with a single perforation. The burial can be dated to the ninth–tenth century, and has been discussed in detail above (Arne

1932b: 67–82; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 80f; Larsson 2010: 115f; Gardeła 2012: 64ff, 2016: 322f; Andersson 2018: 168–73).

- Male burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Tuna – Hjelsta sn, Uppland
    - An assemblage recorded in 1823 as coming from a disturbed burial in Tuna, “Giresta sn.”, Uppland. There is no place of that name in the parish, but it is in fact located in neighbouring Hjelsta, on a spit of land extending into Giresta parish, hence the confusion. The Tuna site includes two distinct Viking-Age mound cemeteries, and it is unsure from which of them the finds derive. The iron staff is in two fragments, one 0.18 m long, the other only 0.04 m; both appear to be fragments of the shaft (nothing remains of any ‘handle’), and each fragment includes a rounded mount of bronze very similar to those on the Fyrkat staff. Other finds in the assemblage include a sword and spear, a richly decorated pennanular brooch of high quality, a key, a single weight, a ceramic pot, and various buckles and harness. Of close interest is the presence of a decorated bronze vessel of Eastern type, similar to those from Aska and Klinta – thus the third such combination of a staff and a container of this kind. The assemblage can be dated to the tenth century (Odencrants 1934: 148f).

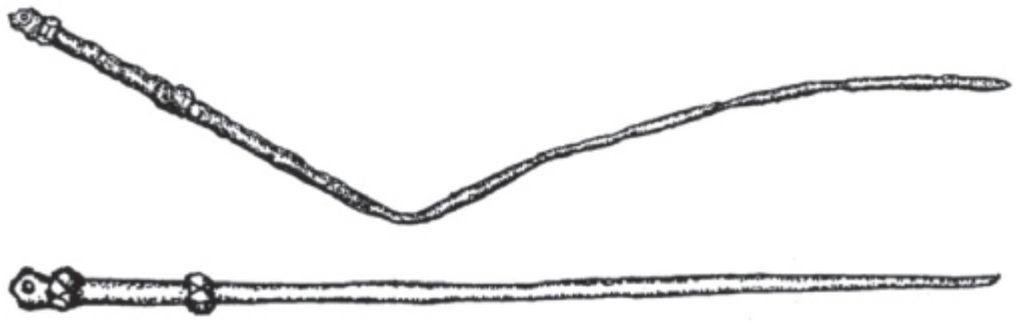


Fig. 3.97 The staff from Aska in Hagebyhöga, Östergötland, as found and reconstructed (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 81; drawing by Håkan Dahl).

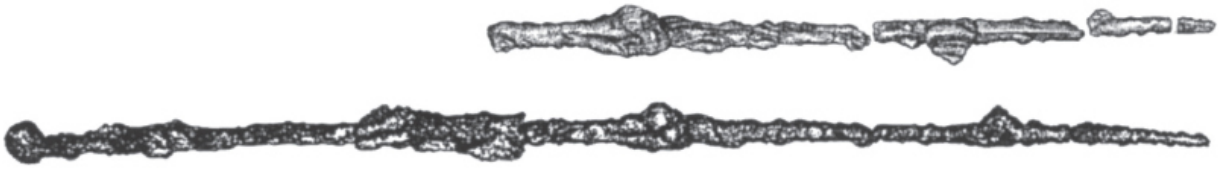


Fig. 3.98 Two views of the fragmentary staff from Álaugarey in Austur-Skafteafellssysla, Iceland, showing the object when found and as preserved today; the projections on the shaft seem to be corrosion products (after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 55; drawing by Håkan Dahl, used by kind permission).

Denmark

- Male burial (note: sex determination has been claimed by the excavator solely through artefactual association, and is thus to be regarded as highly provisional)
  - Ladby – Fyn
    - Found amidships in one of Scandinavia's most famous ship burials, this is a fragmentary object of iron rods plated with silver and gold, together with a shaft mount and an object resembling a berlock, decorated in the Borre style. As early as 1957 parallels were drawn with what were then considered to be meat spits or whips, and – tentatively – it is possible that this object may have been part of a staff, not least in view of contextual parallels with Oseberg. The ship grave is from the tenth century, though the object itself may be older (Thorvildsen 1957: 74–7; Sørensen 2001: 93f; Gardeła 2012: 126f, 2016: 276f).

Iceland

Two staffs are also known from Iceland, both from burials of the ninth to tenth centuries, one female and one probably male. Gardeła (2016: 56f) is sceptical to both examples, but I am not convinced by his objections to their identification as staffs; however, I agree that they do not have clear 'handle' constructions:

- Female burial
  - Álaugarey – Nesjahreppur, Austur-Skaftafellssysla (Fig. 3.98)

        - A richly-furnished grave under a low mound, with a female skeleton accompanied by two oval brooches, an armring, comb, knife, shears and a box. No information was recorded about the disposition of the grave-goods. The staff was 0.78 m long, though it is now much corroded and fragmented into six pieces; to judge from drawings of the object when first excavated it was probably no more than 0.8 m long originally, and was thus complete when found. One terminus is curved round in a loop, a unique feature, while what appear to be knob-mounts on the shaft are actually build-ups of corrosion (no X-rays were made before the staff disintegrated into six pieces). Ninth to tenth century (Shetelig 1937: 210; Eldjárn 1956: 185f; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 55f; Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2016: 240f, 617; Gardeła 2012: 132f, 2016: 280f).
- Male (?) burial
    - Stærri-Árskógur – Árskógshreppur
        - A probable man's grave on the west bank of Eyjafjörður, the corpse buried in a sitting position. The grave also contained a knife, with the burial of a horse 5 m away to the north. Only 0.2 m of the staff is preserved, but it does not seem to have had the 'basket' construction; on close inspection, the object could not have been used for roasting as the shaft has a rounded end that would not permit the threading of meat. Ninth–tenth century (Eldjárn 1956: 131f; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 56; Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2000: 171, 605; Gardeła 2012: 134f, 2016: 282f).

Scandinavian staffs outside Scandinavia and the North

In addition to the staffs from Scandinavia and the North described above, four (possibly five) others have been found in Viking-Age Scandinavian contexts in other countries.

One of these has been described above, in conjunction with the female inhumation at Peel Castle, St. Patrick's Isle, in the Isle of Man. A second example can also be tentatively identified from the British Isles, from the site of Pierowall on Westray, Orkney (Thorsteinsson 1968; Graham-

Campbell & Batey 1998: 129–34; I am indebted to Steven Harrison for bringing this to my attention). In the course of the nineteenth century at least 17 Viking-Age burials were revealed by coastal erosion at the site, but only sketchily recorded; the first systematic analysis of what remained was undertaken as late as the 1960s. One of the burials, Grave 2, was found in 1839 and is remarkable in that it is (as far as I am aware) the only furnished insular Scandinavian interment in which the body was placed face-down. The corpse was wearing two oval brooches, and a ringed pin was also found, suggesting that the person was female. Along the right side of the body lay a long iron implement, which Graham-Campbell & Batey (1998: 131) suggest may have been a knife or a weaving sword. The object is unfortunately now lost, but the description and unusual practice of prone burial suggest to me a serious possibility that this may have been a staff. We can do little more with this find, but the presence of a sorceress in the Northern Isles would in no way be divergent from the wider pattern that we have seen in the distribution of such burials.



Fig. 3.99 The fragmentary iron staff from the Kilmainham cemetery outside Dublin, Ireland, probably from a woman's grave of the mid-ninth century (after Bøe 1940: 97).

Another grave of this kind outside Scandinavia is from Ireland, where a fragmentary iron staff has been found outside Dublin (Bøe 1940: 97; Fig. 3.99). Long thought to be of unknown provenance, a confident attribution to the Kilmainham cemetery has now been made (Harrison 2001: 68; Harrison & Ó Floinn 2014: 206f). The staff can probably be dated to the

mid-ninth century on the basis of the other finds from this cemetery, which seems to have been exclusively associated with the *longphort* established there in 841. The object is now 0.38 m long, but was once much longer (Gardeła 2016: 284–7). It is of the 'basket' type, though all but the ends of the rods have corroded away. A single knob survives, which appears to have been shaped as a flattened sphere with rows of linear ornament; this too is a common form among Viking-Age weights. Only the beginning of the main shaft is present, and this seems to taper in a manner reminiscent of the Fyrkat staff, and it also bears comparison with the example from Jägarbacken. Little further can be added on this piece, except to note that these objects – and presumably their bearers – also found their way to the Scandinavian ventures in Ireland at a very early date. This would provide an interesting link with the description of a possible *seiðr* performance in the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh,* discussed in chapter 2. If this *is* the staff of a *volva* or similar, then this has implications for the nature of these early Viking expeditions to Ireland.

The third and fourth staffs are both spectacular finds from Russia which fall into the same category as those from Birka, Klinta and Fyrkat in that they also have knob-mounts on the shaft, and are thus among the objects that can most securely be interpreted as staffs of sorcery.

One was excavated in 1987 from mound Lb-1, a tenth-century burial from the Lesnaja cemetery at Gnezdovo, the precursor to Smolensk at the start of the Dniepr passage (Fig. 3.100). On the basis of an equal-armed brooch from the same grave, it has been artefactually sexed as female, though of course this is uncertain (Egorov 1996: 59, 64; Duczko 2004: 173; Gardeła 2016: 345ff). The staff was 0.43 m long when found, but the point is missing and the object was presumably once longer. Apart from the missing point, the staff is in excellent condition and particularly interesting in that it clearly lacks the 'basket handle' construction – unlike all the others with shaft mounts. The staff is of square section, made of iron and at one end a hand's length of shaft is bounded by two cast bronze polyhedral mounts, apparently decorated with small notched markings in diamond patterns. A short way down the shaft below the 'grip' is a third bronze mount of the same kind. Above the 'grip' the shaft continues for a short

distance and then splays out to a flat plate that forms the terminal of the staff. Interestingly, and apparently without knowledge of the Scandinavian parallels, the excavators interpreted this object as a *shezl*, 'staff'.

The other Russian example comes from a grave excavated in 1961 on the north shore of Lake Zelikovje in the Tver oblast. Little information is available but the burial contains a single silver oval brooch (Petersen type P-52) of the tenth century and thus could arguably be female. The square-section staff is preserved in two fragments, one of which has two polyhedral bronze mounts decorated with symbols and dot-punched ornament (Eremeev 2007: 252f; Gardeła 2016: 346f).

Wooden staffs





Fig. 3.100 The iron staff from Gnezdovo, near Smolensk in northwest Russia (after Egorov 1996: 64).

In addition to the staffs of iron and bronze, there are also a small number of wooden staffs that have been discovered in Viking-Age Scandinavian contexts, mostly from funerary deposits (see also Jonsson 2007 for numerous other examples continuing into Christian times).

One of these, the long staff in grave 4 at Fyrkat, has been mentioned above. Its length was uncertain as it survived only as a cavity in the corrosion products on the iron meat spit, next to which it had been lying (Roesdahl 1977a: 91). The staff was about the thickness of a finger, and thus unlikely to have been a walking stick. We can say little more about it except to note the emphasis on thin flexibility among some of the staffs described in the written sources, such as the *gambanteinn*. If the object did have some magical connotations, then the Fyrkat grave is the only one so far known to contain two possible staffs of sorcery – the other being the metal rod with shaft mounts discussed above.

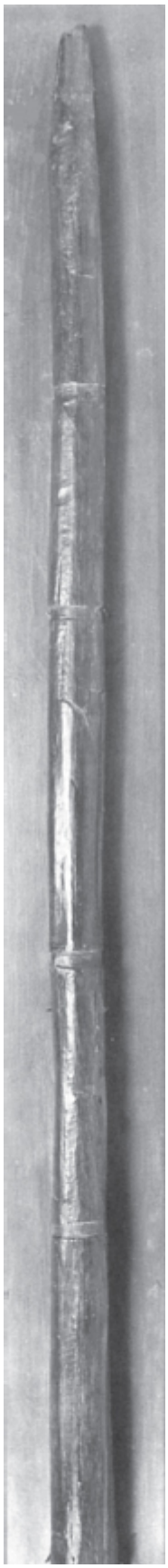




Fig. 3.101 The wooden staff from the Oseberg ship burial (after Ingstad 1992b: 240).

The most spectacular of the wooden staffs from Scandinavian graves is that from the Oseberg ship burial (Brøgger & Shetelig 1928: 270f; Ingstad 1992b: 240; Gardeła 2012: 120ff, 2016: 66–73, 104f, 308f; Fig. 3.101). Its deposition is interesting as it was found in the lower oak chest in the grave chamber, a 1.09 m-long iron-studded box with animal-head clasps that is paralleled only by the chest in Birka grave Bj. 845, which is discussed above as another possible *volva* burial. In view of the nature of these graves, the placement of the Oseberg staff in such a chest is unlikely to be coincidental. Another curious feature is that the chest also contained the two ornately-wrought iron chains mentioned above, the links of which closely resemble the 'basket' constructions on the metal staffs (Brøgger & Shetelig 1928: 136).

Unfortunately, due to the plundering of the grave chamber in antiquity, more details of its exact disposition are unknown. In the context of the deliberate disturbance of the grave, it is interesting that those who broke into the chamber chose not to open the chest containing the possible equipment of sorcery. The chest is discussed by Brøgger & Shetelig (1928: 118–21) while its opening *in situ* and the layout of the contents is described by Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig (1917: 38–41). The relation of this box's contents to the scenes on the tapestries from the Oseberg grave has been reviewed above.

The Oseberg staff is 1.07 m long and formed as a hollow tube, made in two half-sections of birch originally fastened together with twine or some other organic substance that has now decayed. Six 1 cm-wide indentations encircle the shaft of the staff at regular intervals along its length, and the binding material was probably wound around it at these points. The object is finely polished and planed to give a somewhat faceted appearance, but is otherwise undecorated. Ingstad (1995: 142f) argues that the staff represents a variety of symbols, including the reed of fertility and a kind of state

sceptre which has resonances with later medieval examples, and also the staffs of the *volur*. The first two of these associations are very difficult to support, I feel, but the idea of the Oseberg cane as a symbol of sorcery fits well with the rest of the grave. Again, this may represent one of the staff forms mentioned in the written sources, and given the status of the Oseberg grave, presumably one of the most powerful of these. It also has some parallels with a wooden object bound with metal ribbon and found in Becan Bog, Co. Mayo, Ireland. This has been interpreted as a reed instrument, and dated by radiocarbon to the eighth century (O'Dwyer 2002).

Another wooden object in a female inhumation grave, from Os in western Norway, has also been claimed as the staff of a *volva* (Hjørungdal 1989: 102f; 1990). The burial dates from the late Migration period, which Hjørungdal takes as an indication that such sorceresses can be traced far back into the Scandinavian Iron Age. This is a problematic assertion, however, as is the identification of the grave as that of a *volva*. Firstly, the 'staff' is actually more like a small post rather than a portable object. Shetelig (1912: 134) writes that it was square in section, 2 m long and 9 cm in diameter. While it may have been a tool of sorcery, there is nothing to actually suggest this. Its extraordinary breadth is also problematic, as a staff 9 cm thick could hardly have been held comfortably in the hand (this is slightly more than the diameter of an average wine bottle), and at 2 m long would have been very heavy indeed. Secondly, the other grave-goods are in no way unusual, consisting of jewellery, a knife, a pottery vessel and so on, the only exception being a flat stone at the foot of the grave which Hjørungdal sees as a symbolic boundary between different worlds or states of being (1989: 103). This is certainly a puzzling grave, but in my opinion its early date and lack of additional distinguishing features make a link to sorcery very questionable.

As Anna Lihammer has noted (2012: 198), it is possible that wooden staffs once far outnumbered those of iron, but the majority have naturally perished. In some cases they do not seem to have been recorded even when found. An example here is the cemetery from Tuna i Badelunda, in Swedish Västmanland, where several very rich female burials were excavated in the 1950s. Organic preservation was unusually good, as can be seen in the

photographs of the fieldwork, and in the ninth-century boat grave 75 a long wooden staff can be clearly discerned although it is not mentioned in the report other than among “interdeterminable wooden pieces” (Nylén & Schönbäck 1994: vol. 1, 51–3, vol.2: 114, 120; Lihammer 2012: 198).

One further wooden staff is not from a burial context, but was found in a Danish bog at Hemdrup, Næsborg sogn, in Jylland in 1949 (Skautrup 1951; Andersen 1971: 18–21; Gardeła 2012: 130f, 2016: 105f, 274f; Fig. 3.102). When discovered, the staff stood almost vertical in the bog, thrust down into the mud and water. Measuring 0.5 m in length and made of yew, the staff is carefully polished and faceted in a manner similar to the piece from Oseberg. It tapers gently from 3.4 cm in thickness at the end which was nethermost in the bog to 2.1 cm at the other end, which is marked by fire. The thicker end has a bevelled cut resembling the mouth-piece of a flute. Along the broader half of the staff, lines have been deeply cut in the wood to make a series of rhomboid shapes, within which are several more shallowly incised figures and two runic inscriptions (Fig. 3.103). The form of the runes and the presence of a triquetra knot date the staff to the tenth century, perhaps as late as the first half of the eleventh (Andersen 1971: 20).

The interpretation of the images and the runes is difficult, both in terms of understanding their visual scheme, identifying what they are meant to signify, and in decoding their meaning. Four of the figures appear to be animals with short legs, tails and long, elongated bodies. One is drawn in a rhomboid by itself, two appear together in another rhomboid, and the fourth is drawn in the ‘central’ rhomboid alongside one of the runic inscriptions, on the opposite side of which is a human figure. The second runic inscription appears in a field by itself, as does the triquetra and two more abstract designs that are very hard to decipher.

Three main interpretations have been proposed. Skautrup (1951) suggests that the staff was a throwing stick belonging to a shepherd, and that the carvings are idle graffiti depicting the owner and their dogs. One of the runic inscriptions, which mentions a woman’s name, is seen as an ownership mark. Andersen (1971) views the staff as a message of impending war, carried from place to place as an acknowledged signal for mobilisation; he supports this interpretation with reference to other staffs

that were used in this way in post-medieval times. More recently, Back Danielsson (2001, 2007: 233–9) has interpreted the staff as a tool of *seiðr*, depicting a shaman with helping spirits, and with inscriptions carved to drive away a being of sickness. The rhomboid forms are held to resemble the scales of a snakeskin, and the flute-like incision is used to argue that the staff was an instrument played to achieve an ecstatic state.

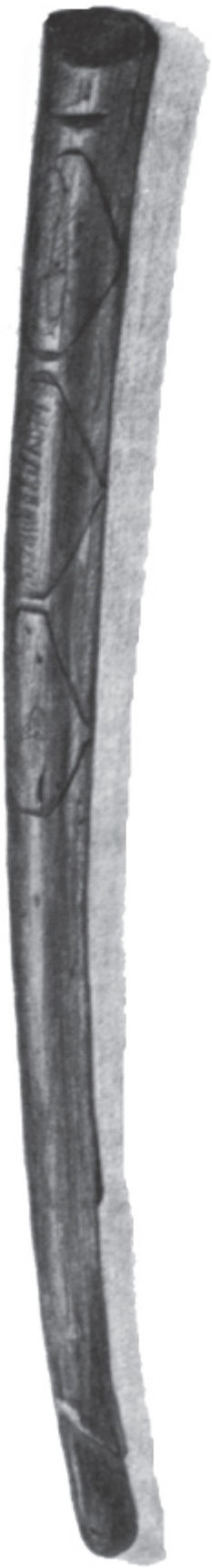


Fig. 3.102 The wooden rune-staff from Hemdrup in Jylland, Denmark, (after Andersen 1971).

The two earlier interpretations, especially that of Skautrup, are hard to credit today. The carvings are clearly very much more than casual doodling, and the idea of the staff as a ‘War Arrow’ has no support in any source relating to the later Iron Age (Andersen does, however, offer a nuanced and undogmatic reading of the object). Back Danielsson’s suggestions are plausible and clearly of relevance to the present discussion.

The runes are crucial, but there is scholarly disagreement as to how they should be read, and how the variant readings should be understood (Moltke 1976: 289f; Nielsen 1984).

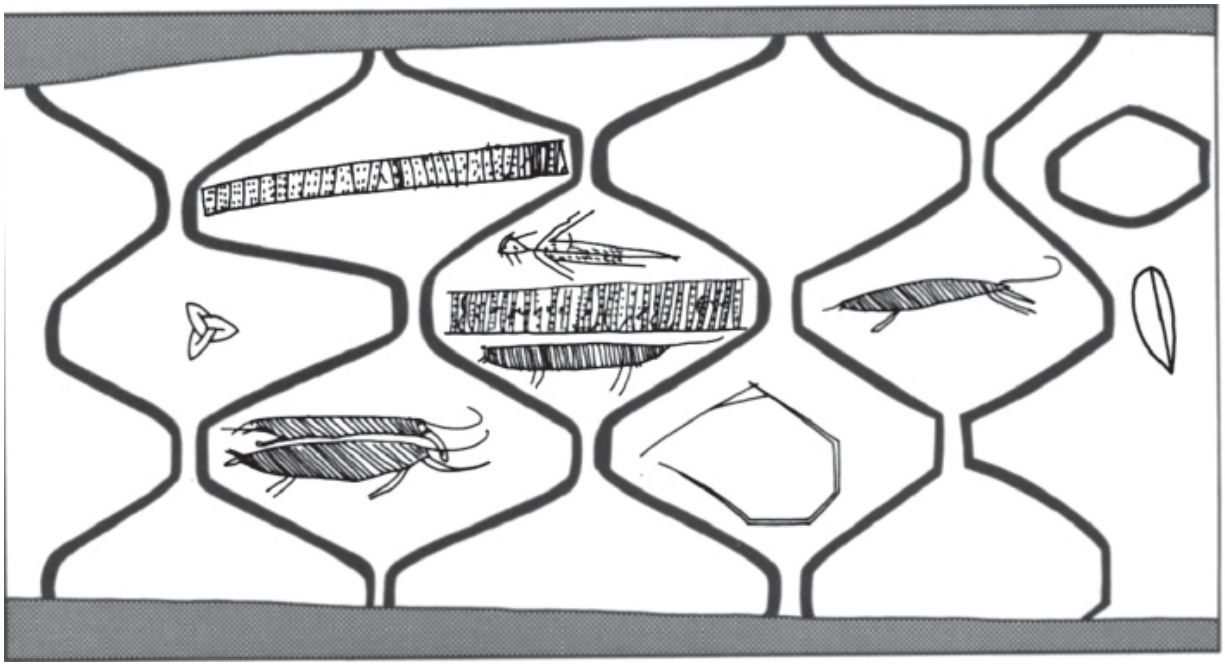


Fig. 3.103 An expanded view of the carvings on the Hemdrup rune-staff, showing the lozenge pattern, runic panels and a number of figures (after Andersen 1971).

The different versions on offer from the runologists translate approximately to:

- ‘The flying (fever-devil?) never got you, Åse [undecipherable]’ (Moltke)
- ‘The flying one never conquered you. Åse is lucky in battle.’ (Nielsen)

Nielsen (1984: 220) sees the inscription as a charm of protection, carved on the staff as a love-token to the woman Åse, who is the figure depicted on the object together with her dogs. Like Skautrup’s view of the shepherd, this interpretation goes far beyond what we can actually read from the staff, and the inference of relationships, gifts of affection and so on really cannot be supported from the evidence. Back Danielsson (2001: 74) is right in also stressing the marked androcentricism of these earlier interpretations.

It is clear that the runes concern a flying being of some kind, and a form of spirit sending or charm against illness is a reasonable interpretation (cf. Röstberg 2009). Back Danielsson’s reading of the staff is in no way anachronistic in terms of what we know of the later Iron Age, and indeed fits perfectly with the picture that I have argued for here. Like the previous interpreters, however, the problem is the level of detail to which she takes this, and the process of inference from the material to her conclusions. Pursuing the theme of flight, she sees the small markings on the body of the human figure as a ‘feather-like garment’, indicative of shape-shifting (Back Danielsson 2001: 74). Perhaps the markings are indeed feathers, but they may equally represent fur, or chain-mail, or ‘wounds’ made by repeatedly stabbing the figure to inflict injury, or any one of several other possibilities. Certainly the animals may be spirits themselves – as we shall see below, there are written sources which speak of causing such creatures to ‘run far into the night’, and this is perhaps what we see on the Hemdrup staff (cf. *Fóstbræðra saga* 9). However, they may have other, quite different meanings. The rhomboid ‘snake-scales’ are subjective impression alone, and the flute-like incision similarly does not mean that the object can be ‘played’ (though we might think here of the Irish instrument from Becan, noted above, and of course this does not preclude metaphorical associations). The analogies cited by Back Danielson derive from Eliade, and are not further specified.

The Hemdrup staff is clearly a very special object, both in its form, decoration and the context of its deposition. Given the runic inscriptions,

the triquetra knot and the sheer *specificity* of the design scheme (it is not a random creation), I agree with Back Danielsson that it was an object connected with the supernatural. Further details are out of reach, though we may speculate that it might represent one of the more oblique kinds of staffs mentioned in the written sources.

Summarising the staffs

Tables 3.2 and 3.3 combine all the information presented individually above, showing the staffs by country, sex of the burial context where appropriate, dated by century and divided by type. They can also be summarised as follows: 51 staffs (47 iron, 4 wooden) 37 from burials (34 iron, 3 wood), 12 stray finds (iron), 2 from depositions (1 iron, 1 wood) Norway

25 staffs (24 iron, 1 wood) 17 with ‘handle’, 7 without, 1 wood 16 from burials (15 iron, 1 wood) 9 stray finds (iron) Sweden

12 staffs (11 iron, 1 wood) 9 with ‘handle’, 2 without, 1 wood 9 from burials (8 iron, 1 wood) 2 stray finds (iron) 1 ritually deposited (iron) Denmark

6 staffs (4 iron, 2 wood) 2 with ‘handle’, 2 without, 2 wood 4 from burials (3 iron, 1 wood) 1 stray find (iron) 1 ritually deposited (wood) *Table 3.2 The corpus of suggested ‘staffs of sorcery’ from Scandinavia and the Viking diaspora.*

Site name	*Mounts*	*Context*	*Accompanying individual(s)*	*Date*
1. SCANDINAVIA				
NORWAY				
Iron staffs with expanded 'handle'				
Arnestad, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	10 C
Fure, Sogn og Fjordane		I	F a	8 C
Gausel, Rogaland, S-1883		I	F a	9 C
Gutdalen Stryn, Sogn og Fjordane		S		VA
Hellebust, Sogn og Fjordane		I/C?	M a	8 C
Hilde, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	10 C
Huseby, Sør-Trøndelag		I/C?	F a	9 C
Kaupang, Vestfold; Ka. 294-296		I	F+F+M+C ao (+M?)	10C
Kvåle, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	10 C
Mindre-Sunde, Sogn og Fjordane		I	M a	8 C
Myklebostad, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	10 C
Nordfjord, Sogn og Fjordane		I/C?	F a	10 C
Søreim, Sogn og Fjordane		S		VA
Trå, Hordaland		I	F a	10 C
Villa farm, Møre og Rogndal		C	F a	VA
Øvre Høvum, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	10 C
Unprovenanced, Norway		S		VA
Iron staffs without expanded 'handle', including shafts only				
Hopperstad, Sogn og Fjordane		C	F a	9/10 C
Melhus, Trøndelag		I	F+M a	9 C
Steine, Nordland		S		VA
Tveiten, Buskerud		S		VA
Vatne, Hordaland		C	F a	10 C
Vestre Berg, Hedmark		I?	M a	10 C
Veka, Hordaland		I	F a	10 C
Wooden staff				
Oseberg, Vestfold		I	F+F oag	9 C
SWEDEN				
Iron staffs with expanded 'handle'				
Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 660*	Yes	I	F a	10 C
Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 760	Yes	C	F a	10 C
Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 834	Yes	I	F+M a	10 C
Birka, Mälaren, Bj. 845	Yes	I	F a	10 C
Gnesta		S		VA
Gävle, Gästrikland		I	M a	VA
Jägarbacken, Närke, Grave 15		C	F a	10 C
Klinta, Öland, Grave 59:2&3	Yes	C	F+M ao	10 C
Lilla Ullevi, Uppland		R		7/8 C

Iron staffs without expanded 'handle', including shafts only				
Aska, Östergötland		C	F a	9/10 C
Tuna i Hjelsta, Uppland	Yes	I	M a	10 C
Wooden staff				
Tuna i Badelunda, Vm, Grav 75		I	F ao	9 C
DENMARK				
Iron staffs with expanded 'handle'				
Fuldby, Sørø		I	?	10 C
Lejre 'house plate'*		S		10 C
Iron staffs without expanded 'handle', including shafts only				
Fyrkat, Jylland, Grave 4	Yes	I	F a	10 C
Ladby, Fyn	Yes?	I	M a	10 C
Wooden staffs				
Fyrkat, Jylland, Grave 4		I	F a	10 C
Hemdrup, Jylland		R		10 C
2. THE VIKING DIASPORA				
FINLAND				
Iron staff with expanded 'handle'				
Pukkila-Isokyrö, Vasa		C	??	8 C
ICELAND				
Iron staffs without expanded 'handle', including shafts only				
Álaugarey-Nesjahreppur, Þjms.7706		I	F ao	9/10 C
Stærri-Árskógur, Þjms.11563		I	M a	9/10 C
ISLE OF MAN				
Iron staff without expanded 'handle'				
Peel Castle, 'Pagan Lady'		I	F ao	10 C
ORKNEY				
Iron shaft only				
Pierowall, Westray, Grave 2		I	F a	VA
IRELAND				
Iron staff with expanded 'handle'				
Kilmainham, Dublin		I	?	9 C
RUSSIA				
Iron shafts only				
Gnezdovo, Mound Lb-1	Yes	I?	F a	10 C
Lake Zelikovje, Tver	Yes	I?	F a	10 C

* the expanded 'handle' on these objects is assumed by association with similar finds, but not proven

Key:

Context: C = Cremation, I = Inhumation, S = Stray Find, R = Ritual Deposit

Sex: F = Female adult, M = Male adult, C = Child of indeterminate sex

Determined by: a = artefacts, o = osteology, g = genomics

Date*:* nC = Century, VA = Viking Age

Table 3.3 The corpus of suggested 'staffs of sorcery' from Scandinavia and the Viking diaspora, combined data. Tabled by location, staff type, assumed sex of the deceased and dating in centuries.

Modern Country or	*Staffs with 'expanded handle'*											*Staffs with mounts*	*Staffs without 'expanded handle' or where such is uncertain*							*Wooden staffs*		
	Male			*Female*			*Unknown*			*Stray Finds*	*Ritual*	*Female*	*Male*		*Female*				*Stray Finds*	*Female*		*Ritual*
Region	*8th*	*10th*	*VA*	*8th*	*9th*	*10th*	*8th*	*9th*	*10th*	*VA*	*7th/8th*	*10th*	*9th/10th*	*10th*	*9th*	*9th/10th*	*10th*	*VA*	*VA*	*9th*	*10th*	*10th*
Norway	2			1	2	8				3				1	1	1	2		2	1		
Sweden			1			1				1	1	6				1				1		
Denmark									1	1		2									1	1
Iceland													1			1						
Finland							1															
Ireland								1														
Orkney																		1				
Isle of Man																	1					
Russia												2										

Iceland
2 staffs (both iron, without ‘handles’, from burials) Finland
1 staff (iron, with ‘handle’, from a burial) Orkney
1 staff (iron, without ‘handle’, from a burial) Isle of Man 1 staff (iron, without ‘handle’, from a burial) Ireland
1 staff (iron, with ‘handle’, from a burial) Russia
2 staffs (both iron, without ‘handles’, from burials) The objects of Bøgh-Andersen’s type III have a broad distribution, with concentrations around the Sogn and Fjordane regions of Norway and Swedish Uppland. A number of trends can be seen. For example, there is a complete absence of staffs with shaft mounts in Norway, while they are known from Sweden and elsewhere in the tenth century. However, this is also when the staffs with expanded ‘handles’ peak in Norway, which may suggest that these are different regional manifestations of the same phenomenon.

The variation between the staffs’ designs can also be explained without difficulty. The staff described in *Eiríks saga rauða* actually sounds more like the examples which do *not* have mounts or knobs on the shaft, as it mentions only a knob at the top. If we allow for regional variation, this is another argument for interpreting all Bøgh-Andersen’s type III objects as staffs of sorcery. The ones with ‘handles’ with associated terminals resemble the saga descriptions, and the other archaeological finds simply cannot function in the way that has been claimed (the mounts on the shafts ruling out their use as spits, the ‘handles’ being too broad to hold, and none of the objects being able to be used as a whip handle).

Staff amulets

Staffs also appear in the archaeological record in forms other than the actual objects themselves. A special category of these is formed of miniature examples, strung on ‘amulet rings’ of the kind familiar from other pendant charms such as Þórr’s hammers, miniature weapons, sickles, fire-steels and so on (see Fuglesang 1989 for problems of source-criticism in identifying ‘amulets’ in the Viking Age; cf. Price 1995b).

Occurring in groups of three or more, either alone or with other ‘amulets’, at least five staff rings of this kind are known from Viking-Age contexts. Their form is always the same: a simple silver or bronze wire 2–3 mm in cross-section,

folded around in a loop at one end as a means of attachment to the ring from which the objects are suspended.

One such ring was recovered from a silver hoard and found at Klinta in Köpings parish on Öland, very close to the grave discussed above (Fig. 3.104). Three staffs are here threaded on a silver wire, alternating in sequence with a miniature fire-steel, a sword and a spear-head (Stenberger 1958: pl. 41; an earlier picture in Montelius' *Svenska fornsaker* [1872: 164] shows the object more complete; cf. Arrhenius 1961: 141f). The hoard is dated to 1050 or later (Stenberger 1958: 166), and also included a so-called 'valkyrie' figurine.

Two examples are known from Birka. The first is among Stolpe's material excavated from the Black Earth of the town, but without closer provenance (Fig. 3.105). The piece is of bronze, with nine staffs – perhaps a significant number? – a miniature sword and a small strip of undecorated bronze (Arrhenius 1961: 142). In grave Bj. 60a, a female inhumation, was found a silver ring with four staffs alone (Arbman 1940: pl. 104; 1943: 23ff). The woman was buried with few grave-goods, but she was also provided with another small ring of similar form, with two small Þórr's hammers.

Like the real staffs, the amulets have also been found in apparently Scandinavian contexts elsewhere in Europe. An iron ring with four staffs and a hook has been found in Finland, at Kokemäki in Astala (Kivikoski 1937: 232ff; Fig. 3.106), though the fastenings of the staffs differ slightly from those found in Sweden. One more example is known from a 'Varangian' mound burial near Smolensk (Sizov 1902: pl. 4/12).



Fig. 3.104 The silver ring with staff pendants found in a hoard at Klinta, Köpings parish, Öland (after Graham-Campbell 1980b: 183).

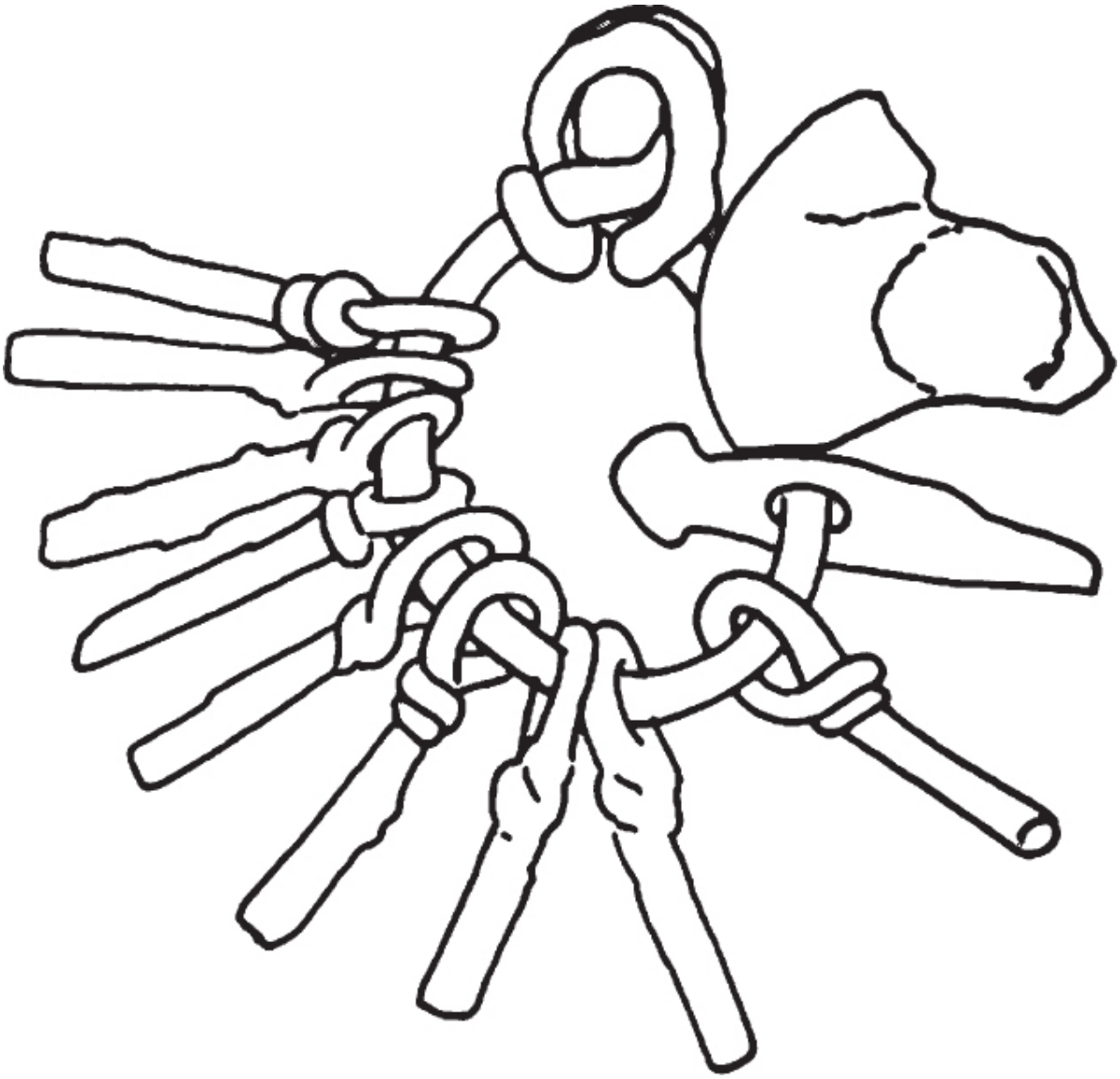


Fig. 3.105 The bronze ring with staff pendants found in the Black Earth at Birka by Hjalmar Stolpe (after Arrhenius 1961: 142; drawing by B. Händel)



Fig. 3.106 The iron ring with staff pendants found at Kokemäki, Astala, Finland (after Kivikoski 1937: 232).

Once again, when we have any human context for the staffs, they are found associated with women.

Their meaning is of course uncertain, but the link to the various kinds of *seiðr*-staffs is suggestive. This is strengthened by their association with other 'amulets' that can be connected to Óðinn (Arrhenius 1961: 157f). It may also be significant that the staffs never appear on the same ring as Þórr's hammers – a clear suggestion that they are unconnected with this god (*ibid*: 142). It appears that the staffs, like the miniature chairs, may have formed part of the 'tool-kit' of Viking-Age sorceresses.

Narcotics and intoxicants

Plants and other substances with mind-expanding properties are frequently termed entheogens in the literature relating to drug experiences, though the word has found more restricted currency in the academic literature. The idea of an ecstatic experience augmented or prompted by the use of such substances is not a new one in the context of Nordic religion, and there have been several attempts to reconstruct such practices (*e.g.* Sverdrup 1941; Fabing 1956; Doht 1974; Rätsch 1994 provides a comprehensive bibliography but should be used with care; Hedeager 2015: 137ff provides a more nuanced approach). Most of these have concerned the berserk fighting rage, and to a lesser extent the practice of sorcery. Despite a long search for evidence, nothing has emerged to confirm the Viking-Age ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms, the inhalation of narcotics, and so on. There are, however, two archaeological exceptions to this.

The first of these concerns the find of several hundred seeds of henbane (*Hyscyamus sp*.) in grave 4 from Fyrkat (Helbaek 1977: 36; Fig. 3.107). They are unique from a Viking-Age context, though the plant grows readily enough in Scandinavia; contemporary examples are known from Germany and Poland (Roesdahl 1977a: 143). Given the mind-altering properties of henbane there seems little doubt that its presence in such a remarkable grave is significant. The nature of the herb also provides a possible clue to aspects of the rituals that might have been performed with its aid.

From the Middle Ages there are numerous accounts of henbane as an ingredient in witches' ointments, employed when a sorceress wished to change form (Lid 1957). It contains atropine and hyoscyamine which both cause irritation in the throat, dizziness and cramps. Henbane's third element is skopolamin, which has a narcotic effect. When boiled and imbibed in the form of a tea, or when the juice is made into a salve (we can recall here the container of fat in the Fyrkat grave) and smeared on the skin – especially around the armpits, anus, and chest – hallucinations can result. In particular a very strong sensation

of flight is experienced, which remains vivid in the mind for some hours afterwards. Henbane also has modest medicinal properties, and can be used against swelling and muscle pain (*ibid*; Leuner 1970: 288; Merlin 2003; Heimdahl 2009; for more on the properties of henbane, see Rudgley 1998: 127–32 and references therein, including a full section on witches' ointments).



*Fig. 3.107 The constituents of henbane (*Hyscyamus sp.*), as found in grave 4 from Fyrkat (after Köhler 1883–1914)* In recent centuries in Denmark there are traditions of chicken thieves using henbane smudges, wafting the smoke into the coops to render the birds insensible and thus easier to pick up. The English name

of the plant implies a similar practice in the British Isles, and its Latin name – which translates to ‘pigbane’ – indicates that it was used in this way for more than one creature. Henbane can be a powerful drug and could easily cause harm, so care needed to be taken with the correct dosages. For chicken theft, these are preserved in traditional rhymes still known in modern Danish folklore (Else Roesdahl, pers. comm.).

The henbane buried with the woman in Fyrkat 4 may have had quite a different purpose, as the plant is found in late medieval manuals of sorcery in connection with erotic magic. For example, the *Book of Secrets* falsely ascribed to Albertus Magnus mentions that bearing henbane on one’s person made the bearer “pleasant and delectable” and that if a man did so he would be “loved by women” (the context makes it clear that this refers to sexual rather than amorous love; Albertus Magnus 1973: 21). It is interesting that one of the qualities frequently associated with *volur* in the Eddic poems and sagas is their ability to make themselves sexually attractive, as discussed below.

An eleventh-century source from Worms also records the use of henbane in a ceremony to bring rain, involving again what may be a sexual element (Wilson 2000: 68). The plant had to be dug up by a young woman who had first been stripped of all her clothing in front of the assembled village, and who then performed a series of rituals that involved sprinkling her naked body with water. She was accompanied by a group of female assistants.

We cannot know with any certainty how the woman at Fyrkat used her henbane seeds: as a charm for sexual attraction, to affect the weather, to throw onto a fire and induce a drowsiness in her audience, to breathe in herself as a means of approaching a different and more potent state of mind, to drink or to use as an ointment to send her spirit flying – perhaps a combination of these, or none of them.

Another form of mind-altering substance was found in the Oseberg ship burial, from which the remains of cannabis (*Cannabis sativa l.*) were recovered. Four seeds were found among the piles of cushions and their feather stuffing that had been thrown into the prow of the ship when the grave chamber was plundered (Holmboe 1927: 32–5). The pillows lay in the upper layers of the wreckage in the prow, implying that they were among the last things to be removed from the chamber (Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917a: 27). They had probably originally been piled around and under the bodies of the dead, and then

carried out in piles. In addition to those found among the textiles, a single seed was also found embedded in a lump of decayed leather, encircled by a thin woollen cord. This appears to be the remains of a very small leather pouch with a draw-string, in which the seed had been placed, and it may be that all the seeds were originally contained in this bag. Ingstad (1992a: 223) makes the point that the pouch was too small to hold enough seeds for plantation, and that they must therefore have had some symbolic meaning.

In his report on the environmental evidence from the Oseberg ship, Holmboe (1927) suggested that the cannabis seeds were present as representative of the cultivation of hemp for textile production, particularly its use for sail-cloth. This would be appropriate for their presence in a sea-going vessel, but of course overlooks the obvious properties of the plant as a drug. Little more can be added on this here, but in view of the character of the burial, the presence of the staff and other objects discussed above, the mind-altering aspects of cannabis must be taken very seriously in this context. The presence of cannabis in the pouch also brings to mind the Fyrkat henbane, and it may be that here we see another example of the requisites of a Viking-Age sorceress.

In discussing intoxicants and narcotics, we should of course not forget the use of alcohol in ritual contexts (cf. Doht 1974). The account of a Rus' funeral given by Ibn Fadlan may contain evidence for this. At several points in the narrative the writer mentions the Rus' use of *nabidh*, an Arabic word for wine or beer that he seems to have employed to refer to a kind of fermented drink, though we do not know exactly what this was. It is also possible that there were different kinds of drinks that he grouped together using the same term for all. *Nabidh* is twice deposited as grave goods, and Ibn Fadlan also mentions that fully one third of the dead person's wealth was set aside to provide *nabidh* to be consumed during the funeral ceremony. On the day of the burial itself, just after she sees visions of the other world, the slave woman who has volunteered for sacrifice is given a beaker of *nabidh*, over which she sings before drinking. She is then given another beaker, probably also containing *nabidh* though this is not specified, over which she sings for a longer time. The woman presiding over the ceremony (a *volva*?) tells her to drink it quickly, with the result that, as it seems to Ibn Fadlan, the slave becomes confused. He says that "she wanted to go into the tent, and put her head between it and the ship", a puzzling statement that implies that she was behaving irrationally. It is after this that she is led into the ship, where he has sex with six men who then participate in her killing (see below). There seems little

doubt that the slave woman was intoxicated or drugged in some way, and that *nabidh* was regarded as a vital part of the ritual, though clearly it was not necessary for the experiencing of visions as it is consumed after these are seen. We may also speculate that *nabidh* may have been something more than merely alcohol, because this would hardly explain the rapidity of its effect. Further notes on the possible role of alcohol in the wider framework of Norse ritual may be found in Cahen's 1921 study of libation (see especially ch. 4–5).

Charms

Another aspect of sorcery's material culture is a loosely-defined category that we might term 'charms'. We should remember here the enigmatic *tofr* in Þorbiorg's pouch from *Eiríks saga rauða*, and it is here we can consider the pig's jawbone and owl pellets found in the Fyrkat grave.

Pigs' jawbones are also known from several Birka graves (Roesdahl 1977a: 143). These include the ship-setting inhumation of indeterminate sex in Bj. 83; the grave of a decapitated woman in Bj. 959, in which her head had been placed under the right arm while the pig's jawbone had been laid across her severed neck; and the deposits of unburnt jawbones in the cremations Bj. 84, 86 and 210 (Arbman 1943: 36ff, 84, 384). It may be that they have a function relating to the grave itself, rather than as a possession of the deceased. All the Birka examples were placed in the grave after other rituals had been completed, perhaps to guard the corpse or to protect others from it, or to react in some way with a power present in the grave and/or its occupant. This would also fit the Fyrkat example, as the jawbone may have been placed on the box rather than in it.

The Fyrkat pellets are unique from a Viking-Age grave, and their identification as 'charms' is strengthened by the fact that they had clearly been carefully preserved for some considerable time (Roesdahl 1977a: 104). In a similar category we can perhaps place the goose's wing in the woman's grave from Peel Castle on the Isle of Man, considered above.

There are many other examples from Viking-Age contexts, including male graves. A spectacular find of this nature comes from Repton in Derbyshire, where a great many burials have been discovered which can almost certainly be associated with the over-wintering of the Danish army there in 873–874. One of these is an inhumation of a man whose injuries indicate death from a number of violent blows – presumably a battle casualty – who was buried with his weapons and equipment. Among his grave-goods was the tusk of a wild boar and a small bag containing the humerus of a jackdaw, both animals associated with warfare

and its aftermath, and it seems likely that these were personal charms. The Repton warrior was buried wearing a Þórr's hammer pendant around his neck (Biddle & Kjølbye-Biddle 1992: 40–3; Price 1994a: 128).

All of these kinds of objects appear with regularity among the paraphernalia of later medieval sorcery, along with many other parts of animals and flora. The majority of them were used in sympathetic magic of various kinds, though the connection between the object and its perceived function was not always straightforward. A very substantial portion of the charms described in these contexts seem to have been used for erotic magic of different kinds, as discussed below (see Kieckhefer 1991 for many examples of specific charms of this nature).

Songs and chants

One of the most interesting elements of the *seiðr* performance as described in the sources is the role of the so-called *varðlok(k)ur.* The *Eiríks saga rauða* account makes it clear that these are spoken or sung by a circle of female assistants, who gathered around the *seiðr*-performer. In the saga however, only one woman knows the songs and so she sings them alone.

Tolley (1995a: 61) has explored the etymology of the term, and argues that the initial stem *varð-* is derived from *vorðr* (pl. *verðir*), meaning 'guard, watch, protector' (see also Olsen 1916, who believed that it was related to the Scottish dialect word 'warlock', Strömbäck 1989: 24f, and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001). The context makes it clear that the subjects are spirits of some kind, so this would appear to establish that these are guardian spirits – a common element of circumpolar belief systems. The feminine plural form, *-lok(k)ur*, appears with both *k* and *kk* in the manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* (all the variants are listed in Jansson's 1944 edition) which gives rise to two possible meanings based on

- the verbs *loka*, 'fastening', and *lokka*, 'entice': *varðlokur*: 'guardian spirit
- fastenings', *i.e.* what 'locks the spirits in' under the power of the summoner

varðlokkur: 'guardian spirit enticements', *i.e.* what lures the spirits to be present

The *varðlok(k)ur* would therefore seem to be a means of summoning, and possibly binding, spirits of protection, presumably to defend the performer against attack by other supernatural entities. It is also clear that, at least as far as the author of *Eiríks saga* was concerned, these same spirits were the providers of the information that the *seiðr*-performer sought.

A parallel for these *lok(k)ur* can be found in one of the Eddic poems, *Grógaldr* from the *Svipdagsmál*. Strophe 7 contains the following:

Þann gel ek þér annan:	Then I chant another:
ef þú árna skalt	if you shall ever
vilia lauss á vegom,	wearily go on your way,
Urðar lokkor	Urðr's *lokkur*
haldi þér ollom megom,	protect you on all sides,
ef þú á sinnom sér.	if you are met with mockery.

Grógaldr 7; my translation The spirits' association here with Urðr, the *norn* who controls fate, adds support to the notion of these being entities that were in some way bound to a particular individual.

The *varðlok(k)ur* may well be the same as the *seiðlæti*, '*seiðr*-songs', mentioned in *Landnámabók*. Even when sung as part of ill-intentioned sorcery, the *seiðlæti* seem to have been sweet to the ear. Indeed, in the performance described in *Laxdæla saga* (37), undertaken with the intention of killing a young boy, it is actually the pleasantness of the singing that lures the victim to his death. Here again we see the attractive function of the songs, calling the boy just as the *varðlok(k)ur* call the spirits.

The *varðlok(k)ur* and *seiðlæti* could also be combined with other songs, for example in *Laxdæla saga* (35) when Kotkell and his sons employ these together with *fræði* – a kind of mumbled formula – and *galdrar*. The idea of *seiðr*-and *galdr*-chants as a form of sung poetry has been raised by Göransson (1999: 208), but this is difficult to support from the written sources. They certainly seem to have had a high pitched melody of some kind, rather than being mere formulae, and the nearest equivalents are probably the herd-calls (*lockrop* in modern Swedish) used for summoning cattle and other domesticates until early modern times. Siikala (1990) has compared both the *varðlok(k)ur* and *galdrar* to the later Finnish *tietäjä* chants, which she argues were a similar form of shamanic ecstatic device (see also DuBois 1999: 132f for a deeper comparison of Norse and Finnish practices in this context).

By the late Viking Age and probably earlier, terms like *galdr* were also used in a purely poetic sense, in kennings most often associated with the noise of battle. Typical examples include *hjorva galdr* ('sword-*galdr*'), *vápna galdr* ('weapon-*galdr*') and so on. We have already seen how the four known *seiðr* kennings all use the term in the sense of a battle-song, a meaning that was apparently acquired by the early tenth century. Strömbäck (1935: 119) has therefore suggested that *seiðr* was originally a form of chant in its own right,

functioning as both the name of the ritual, a verb for its performance and as one of the possible chants used in its undertaking.

The problem of trance and ecstasy

As we have seen from the dispute between Strömbäck and Ohlmarks, a crucial question in the *seiðr* performance is the degree to which it involved states of trance and ecstatic experience (a question taken up later by Dillmann amongst others). Both made comparisons with more comprehensive ethnographic descriptions of shamanic séances, but some of the parallels quoted are of a more exotic nature. For example, in search of analogies Olrik (1909: 6) and Strömbäck (1935: 113ff) tried to compare the *seiðr* ritual with the Delphic ecstasy, not least by finding a parallel for the *seiðhjallr* in the 'tripod' construction associated with the Greek oracle. Neither of these scholars was especially convinced by the similarities between the two traditions.

At one level this whole debate can be avoided, due to the inherent limitations of the source material. We have already reviewed all the descriptions of *seiðr* performances from the Old Norse texts, and it is quite simply impossible to come to a firm conclusion as to the exact state of consciousness achieved by the *volur* and other sorcerers. Ohlmarks in particular over-stated his case, and his terminologies of 'arctic' and 'sub-arctic' shamanism only function within the frame of reference that he had himself established.

More useful evidence can be obtained from the circumstantial details of the descriptions, and we may examine some of these here. We can turn first to a remarkable and surprisingly little-known ritual described in strophe 51 of the twelfth-century poem *Sólarljóð* (the 'Song of the Sun'), in which we read the following:

Á norna stóli	On the chair of the *nornir*
satk níu daga,	I sat nine days,
þaðan vask á hest hafinn,	then I was raised up on a horse,
gýgjar sólir	the giantesses' sun
skinu grimmliga	shone grimly
ór skýdrúpnis skýum.	from the cloud-dripper's clouds.

Sólarljóð 51; my translation after Finnur Jónsson's Danish in Skjaldedigtning B:I: 635–48

The verse is late, and the poet is presumably composing on the basis of folk memory rather than observation, but the content is extraordinary. Nine days of sitting still leads to an attainment of a vision, in which the sorceress is borne upwards by a horse (Sleipnir?), and granted a sight of cosmic landscapes. Despite the date, in looking for shamanic ecstasy described in specific terms in relation to Norse mythology, "we can hardly ask for more" (Buchholz 1971: 15).

We can also consider the enigmatic overtones of the verb *leika*, used to describe the performance of *seiðr* as well as other forms of sorcery. We have already seen its use in *Voluspá* 22 above, to describe the actions of the *volva* Heiðr: *Seið hón kunni, /seið hón leikin.* In one of its senses, the verb means 'to play', but in the lines above it appears in the passive form, suggesting that Heiðr was played *with*. Following this, in Dronke's translation quoted earlier there are connotations of possession and ecstasy – '*Seiðr* she had skill in, /*seiðr* she practised, possessed' – which she derives from the idea that an external agency toyed with the *volva* by manipulating her (Dronke 1997: 133; see also North 1997: 49). In support she cites the example of the shepherd Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* 53, who is driven insane by the spirit of the dead sorceress Þorgunna – he is said to be *leikinn*, implying that something has fastened upon him. However, the verb can also mean 'to move' in the sense of drifting or swaying. The lines from *Voluspá* could equally be rendered "*Seiðr* she had skill in/through *seiðr* she [was?] moved".

The same sense is found in *Hávamál* 155, when Óðinn recounts the tenth in his list of spells. Here we can notice the use of *leika* to refer to the way in which the *túnriður* appear to Óðinn. The use of the verb would seem to refer to both the motion of the performer's body, as perhaps in the *Voluspá* example, or to its physical (or ethereal) travel, as would be more appropriate for *Hávamál* 155. It is interesting to compare this to the group of terms in the Sámi languages, discussed in the following chapter, that refer to the motion of the *noaidi* as he enters trance – again in relation to posture, movement and even the flow of fluids in the body as they change during the passage into a different state of consciousness. Even if *we* cannot be sure exactly what *leika* means, it is still important to understand that the Norse certainly did, and to note that a vocabulary for these aspects of sorcery existed at all.

This was linked early on to the concept of a 'free-soul', which could wander from the body as we have seen in chapter 2 (*e.g.* Storm 1893). While accepting the evidence for trance in *seiðr*, other scholars have argued that there is

nevertheless no evidence for soul travel of the kind found in Siberia and among the Sámi. Instead, it may have been that the *seiðr*-performer's trance was more a state of receptiveness, through which contact and exchange could more readily be made with summoned spirits (Tolley 1995a: 58; cf. Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 20).

A further, and suggestive, aspect of the process of entering trance is found in two of the descriptions from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3) mentioned above, when Heiðr yawns widely at the commencement of her ritual. Tolley (1995a: 58) has argued that this "probably indicates a breathing in of spirits … rather than a letting out of the free-soul". What is further unique about this passage is that the only parallels for yawning or gaping widely with the mouth at the start of a shamanistic performance come not from the Sámi area, but from eastern Siberia – for example among the Yukaghirs (Jochelson 1926: 196–9).

This is one of the instances in which source criticism can be applied at its most acute, for two reasons. Firstly, it is interesting that the parallels for this action of yawning are found in a different place (Siberia) to those for other actions described in relation to *seiðr*. If *seiðr* as detailed in the sources resembles several different and widely spaced traditions, hardly any of which could have been contacted by the medieval Norse (how could an Icelander or Norwegian know about the Yukaghirs of eastern Siberia, remote even in our own times?), then this argues that these descriptions are not a medieval invention but instead a memory of something that actually existed. This raises the second point of source criticism here, because an invention would mimic one source close to hand – probably Sámi religion – and would not reflect elements of several other belief systems while being identical with none of them. In other words, *when examined collectively* the sources provide a picture of *seiðr* that appears exactly as we would expect if these writings in fact offer a 'distant mirror' to an ancient reality. *Seiðr* emerges here as a spiritual phenomenon with a structure and characteristics of its own, and at the same time recognisably part of a broader circumpolar tradition of ritual practice.

One of the strongest and most consistent themes in such arctic belief systems is the importance of special gender constructions for the enactment of the rituals. There is a wealth of evidence for similar features as part of the *seiðr* complex, and we can now move on to examine them.

Engendering *seiðr*

As we have seen in Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, the *seiðr* ritual was encoded with a number of taboos and social prescriptions regarding its performance:
En þessi fjolkyngi, ef framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmonnum skammlaust viðat fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt.

But this sorcery [*fjolkyngi*], as is known, brings with it so much *ergi* that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill was taught to the priestesses [*gyðjur*].

Ynglingasaga 7; my translation

We must examine the social boundaries within which these things operated, and the negotiated identities of *seiðr*'s practitioners. It is evident that men and women played very different roles in connection with these rituals, and that the performance of this sorcery was firmly located at society's moral and psychological borders. It is equally clear that at least some aspects of it were in some way sexual in nature, perhaps extending to carnal elements in their performance.

Much of the work in this area has concentrated on this concept of *ergi* that Snorri mentions, an unusual and highly charged state conferred upon men by various forms of supposedly 'unmanly' behaviour, but above all by their practice of *seiðr.* Combining suggestions of effeminacy and a strange kind of moral horror, the condition of *ergi* evoked both disgust and fear, and those affected seem to have in some way moved beyond the normal borders of society. Connected to it was a special complex of insults called *níð*, which we also must examine in this context.

As a counterpart to this, other writers have focused more upon the women who could perform the *seiðr* rituals without risk of social censure, a fruitful area of feminist research. Still other scholars have studied the social boundaries of *seiðr* from the perspective of queer theory, using this and other theoretical tools to explore gender constructions extending beyond the binaries of biological sex.

Taken together, this work has therefore resulted in three primary categories of •interpretational models for the engendered performance of *seiðr*: a focus on •concepts of masculinity, especially with reference to homosexuality a focus on •powerful women, mainly with reference to seeresses and divination a focus on bisexuality, third gender constructions and queer interpretations In this section we can review this work, but also attempt to go further and explore what may

have lain behind these categories. In particular, no attempt has ever been made to understand how the people who performed *seiðr* related *to each other*. Similarly, beyond the field of social attitudes and identity, there has also been little work undertaken on just what it was that made these individuals different from one another – a question that leads to the obvious possibility that there may have been different kinds of *seiðr*, that worked in different ways to achieve different ends.

We also need to ask how and why all these varied individuals chose, or were selected for, their path in life. For example, despite the extreme nature of the social taboo against the performance of *seiðr* by males, it is nonetheless clear that many men became masters of these rituals: why, and who were they? How were the female *seiðr*-workers perceived by other women in Viking society? If there were further, more complex gender constructions among the people who performed *seiðr*, what was the social role of these individuals and how did they take on such identities? To begin to move closer to these issues, we can make a deeper examination of the sexual and moral restrictions in question, the concept of *ergi* and *níð*.

Ergi, níð and witchcraft

In the broader discussion of *seiðr* we have already seen several examples of *ergi* in association with men who practised this magic, and also of similar accusations made against gods such as Óðinn. A typical description is that applied to the *seiðskratti* Þórgrímr neb in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (18), who performs *seiðr* with *allri ergi ok skelmisskap*, 'all its *ergi* and devilry' (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2008). As we have seen, from *Skírnismál* 26 it is even clear that there was an *ergi*-rune, and the concept seems to be mentioned in the sorcerous curse on the runestones from Stentoften, Gummarp and Björketorp in Blekinge (Jansson 1987: 24; these stones have now been fully published in the new catalogues of Danish runic monuments and inscriptions, Imer 2015, 2016: 103–7, 257f).

What did *ergi* mean? Firstly we can note that it appears in several forms: the noun *ergi* and its adjective *argr*, and the metathesis *regi*/*ragr*. There is also a passive verb *ergjask*, 'to become *argr*' (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 18). All these words are disparaging, and have a basic sexual meaning, but they also extend this "to signify a quality or tendency" (*ibid*). The whole *ergi* complex was intimately related to a special form of near-ritualised insult called *níð*, codified by law and extensive in the range of functions that it could serve.

Scholarly interest in the condition of *ergi* can be traced back to some of the earliest work on the Old Norse written sources, though its connotations of perceived sexual deviance clearly gave cause for concern. The first extensive treatment of the subject appeared in 1902 in the Leipzig journal *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität,* in the anonymous article 'Spuren von Konträrsexualität bei den alten Skandinaviern'. A brave piece of work in the climate of the times (and hence its author's hidden identity), this makes tentative suggestions of a 'special' type of sexuality connected with the rituals – the notion of anything approaching homosexual Vikings being a difficult one to raise at the height of National Romanticism.

This idea that the performance of sorcery by men carried passive homosexual connotations was next remarked upon by Eduard Westermarck (1909: 382), who took up *ragr* and *ergi* in his monumental cross-cultural survey of moral concepts. Even at this early date, he located his discussion in relation to shamanism and what we would now term the special gender constructions of Siberian ritual specialists. The same line was taken in Sweden not long after, by Erik Noreen (1922: 40–7, 55, 60–4) and Ivar Lindquist (1923: 178).

Noreen (1922: 40) effectively summarised the nuanced meanings of *ergi*, and

- the states of *argr* and *ragr* when used of men: 'morally useless' in a general
- sense 'unmanly', with strong connotations of perversity and taking the female
- role in sexual acts 'one who employs sorcery, and specifically *seiðr*'
- 'cowardly'

These meanings are brought out fully in the law codes, especially against insults in relation to insinuations of feminine behaviour. In *Frostatingslagen*, for example, full compensation (*fullrétti*) must be paid if a man is said to have given birth, or compared to a female animal using appropriate terms such *märr* ('mare') and *hyndla* ('bitch'). The same penalty applies if a man has been called *sköka* ('whore'), or said to have acted as a woman every ninth night, or performed sorcery. Similar punishments are prescribed for accusations of *argr* behaviour in *Västgötalagen*, *Gulatingslagen* and the Icelandic *Grágás*. In the sagas these same kinds of insult often play key roles in the action and precipitate violent revenge, for example in *Gísla saga* (2), *Njáls saga* (44, 123), and many others (see Noreen 1922: 42–7).

Following a brief comparison with Tactitus' comments on ancient Germanic punishments for homosexuality (Beckman 1936; Ström 1942), and an

etymological paper by Markey in 1972, the full implications of *ergi* in this context were first drawn together by Folke Ström in 1973 and 1974. They have been presented in the most extensive fashion so far by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in his important work *Norrønt nid* (1980, published in English in 1983), to which readers are referred for a very complete discussion.

Níð could be communicated in several ways, most often verbally or as a *tréníð*, a 'wood-*níð*'. This latter referred either to remarks carved in runes, or to actual sculptures depicting men engaged in sexual acts and directed against particular individuals either by accompanying inscriptions or the context of their placement (the larger complex of *níð* types has been explored by Noreen, 1922: 37–65 and most comprehensively by Almqvist in his two-volume survey of *níð* against princes and missionaries, 1965 and 1974).

It is significant that *níð* was considered so serious that in legal terms it was equated with murder and rape, and similarly punishable by outlawry and liability to blood revenge. We find the reason for this in the wider dimensions of these insults. As we have seen, *ragr* signifies a personal quality, which is sexual in its immediate meaning but has broader implications. In a paper published shortly before his death, Meulengracht Sørensen explains:

The man who is *ragr* is willing to pay the female part in sexual relations, and from this basic meaning is derived an ethical. If a man is accused of being unmanly, the allegation is not only signifying a sexual disposition, but also a more general quality. The unmanly man is everything that a man should not be with regard to morals and character. He is effeminate and he is a coward, and consequently devoid of honour. This can be considered from the basic sexual meaning. The line of thought behind the association is that a man who subjects himself to another in sexual affairs will do the same in other respects, and fusion between the notions of sexual unmanliness and unmanliness in an ethical sense stands to the heart of *níð*. In other words, the substance of *níð* is not sexual perversion, even though it is cast in this form. Its meaning is moral.

Meulengracht Sørensen 2000: 81

The manner in which such concepts were expounded could vary immensely. In particular, the anal connotations of *ergi* could be widely employed, as Clunies Ross has shown in her study of 'Hildr's ring' (1973), referring to an episode from the *Ragnarsdrápa* in which a *valkyrja* presents this object to her father. Clunies Ross interprets the gift as an insult with connotations of passive homosexuality,

made by Hildr in revenge for her father's negligence in allowing her to be abducted. We will examine the story of Hildr again in chapter 6, but can note in passing here that Clunies Ross also finds similar sexual innuendoes in *Hárbarðzljóð* and the *Vatnsdæla saga*.

The Old Norse prose sources are generally rich in sexual themes (see Jorgensen Itnyre 1991 for a general survey), and the use of language of extreme obscenity seems to have been relatively common in the Viking Age. This was employed as a kind of currency of insult, escalating in strength until it entered the realm of true *níð* and thus matters of mortal weight. 'Insult poems' are found in many examples as Almqvist has shown, and the tradition continues in a lighthearted form even today in the Scandinavian countries. The most famous 'Viking-Age' example is of course *Lokasenna*, in which the war of words is only ended when Þórr appears and the insults spill over into direct violence.

An allegation of being a *níðingr*, a man who has performed a shameful action, could therefore be used as one of the most powerful insults in the context of Viking-Age warrior ideology. There are several examples in the sagas, but a particularly graphic instance comes from an eleventh-century verse by Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskáld, preserved as part of *Fóstbræðra saga* and other sources (summarised by Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 71–3). Þórmóðr has himself been subject to a *níð*, when a number of his enemies in Greenland have said that he behaved with men in the manner of a mare with stallions. In revenge, Þórmóðr kills them all and in the last of these slayings he finds himself fighting his opponent in open water. As both of them are close to drowning, Þórmóðr manages to rip his enemy's belt, causing the man's trousers to slip down his legs so he cannot swim. As he drowns, the man's bare buttocks break the surface before he sinks and dies. Þórmóðr later turns this to his advantage when composing a poem on his feat, gaining a final revenge with a vicious *níð* against the man who once directed something similar at him:

Skoptak enn, þás, uppi undarligt á sundi – hrókr dó heimskr við klæki – hans razaklof ganði; alla leitk á Ulli eggveðrs hugar gleggum – setti gaurr ok glotti – goðfjón – viðmér sjónir.

I was still moving back and forth, when the stupid fellow died ignominiously with his arms and legs in a position like a swimmer. His arse gaped strangely. I saw all the hatred of the gods on the cowardly warrior. The gross fellow fixed his eyes on me and grinned.

Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskáld, *lausavísa* 9; translation after Meulengracht Sørensen 2000: 83

The dying man is thus presented as offering himself for sex, and Þórmóðr emphasises the severity of his insult by even bringing in the gods: a *ragr* man earns divine contempt by the unnatural nature of his acts. Sometimes the *níð*-poems could combine several different elements, and even insult more than one party to the alleged sexual act. In a complex skaldic verse from *c*.980 preserved in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (33; see also Skjaldedigtning BI: 166), the Danish king Haraldr is accused of abusing one of his officials, Birgir, but the latter is criticised even more heavily for allowing himself to be so used (Almqvist 1965: 119ff):

þás sparn á mó marnar morðkunnr Haraldr sunnan varð þá Venða myrðir vax eitt, í ham faxa, en bergsalar Birgir bondum rækr í landi (þat sá old) í joldu óríkr fyrir líki.

When Haraldr in the south, renowned for his killings, in the shape [*hamr*] of a horse pressed hard on the moor of the phallus [genitals of a mare], he, the slaughter of the people of Wendia, became all wax. But Birgir, not mighty, stood, in the shape of a mare, in front of him, deserving of being driven away from the country by the divine powers of the land [the *landvættir*]. That all the people observed.

Níð on King Haraldr blátand translation after Almqvist 1965: 121 and notes therein, and Meulengracht Sørensen 2000: 83

The king is shown as misusing his power, is insulted by being compared to a horse, and is also implied to be impotent; Birgir the official is a weakling and takes the sexual role of the mare, a grave *níð*; the whole episode is depicted in terms of shape-shifting, the fertility of horses, and in the context of the *landvættir*.

It is all this combined that lies at the root of the *ergi* connotations of *seiðr*, just as “the relationship between gender and sex on the one hand and honour on the other is fundamental in the concept of *níð*” (Meulengracht Sørensen 2000: 81).

Like all the other feminine attributes proscribed for a man in the law codes, the performance of *seiðr* by women was socially acceptable – the approbation

attached to men doing these things did not reflect on the status of the women who did them, as their contemporaries saw it, by right and nature. Far less work has been undertaken on the attribution of *argr* behaviour to women, which although occurring infrequently in the sources is nonetheless present. As we have seen in the discussion of the effects of the *gambanteinn* staff above, an *argr* woman was afflicted with an excess of her 'natural' sexual instincts, and was consumed by nymphomania.

For men, a proven allegation of *ergi* resulted in social banishment and a general sense of horrified disgust. This extreme bias against male practitioners of sorcery can be traced in Iceland even as late as the Reformation. Of the 125 recorded witchcraft trials held there between 1554 and 1720, only 9 concern the prosecution of women (Óláfur Davíðsson 1903). The contrast with the contemporary picture in Europe is total.

In their attempts to illuminate the effeminate overtones that *seiðr* carried for male performers, several writers have focused on the isolated episodes from the Norse myths in which gods bear women's clothes and are thereby associated with *argr* behaviour (for example, Þórr in *Þrymskvíða* 15–19 is arrayed in a disguise of 'bridal-dress' as part of a trick to retrieve his stolen hammer from the giant Þrymr, who wants Freyja for his wife). One element that has consistently featured in these analyses is the use of the term 'drag' to denote this kind of cross-dressing (*e.g.* "Þórr … in drag", Jochens 1996: 73; "Odin og Loke i *Drag*", Solli 1998: 34). The imposition of modern socio-sexual concepts onto Viking-Age conditions carries risks, not least in confusion as to which particular gender codes are involved. Male attitudes to the wearing of women's attire may well have involved quite complex sexual or ritual associations. In the Eddic poems, it therefore seems more likely that these stories merely illuminate further meanings of *argr*, and does not necessarily make transvestism one of the defining characteristics of *seiðr* as performed by men (*contra* Jochens 1996: 73–74).

More interesting in this context, however, is the anonymous *níð* composed against the missionary bishop Friðrekr, which accused him of giving birth to nine children (Skjaldedigtning B I: 168). The composers of the verse were slain by the man named as the 'father' in the poem, not due to the insult to his own person but because he refused to tolerate the suggestion that the bishop was *ragr*. This episode is the only time outside the Eddic corpus that male childbirth is mentioned, and it is significant that this not only has connotations of *ergi* through its allegations of passive homosexuality but that there is also a supernatural

overtone in the use of the number nine. Jochens has speculated that the bishop may have been cast in an effeminate role due to his flowing vestments, because these are mentioned several times in the prose passages accompanying the poem (1996: 260); this would also link *ergi* to the clothes of a particular ritual specialist.

There is one possible archaeological indication of cross-dressing men, in images on the Gotlandic picture-stones numbers I and IV from Lärbro Tängelgårda (Lindqvist 1942: 94f; Göransson 1999: 67f). These show figures in the typical flowing dress used to indicate women, some of them holding drinking horns, but a number of them appear to have beards and perhaps helmets. On stone IV there are four of these figures side by side, and the 'beards' are very pronounced. The compositions include no clues that help us interpret these scenes, and it may be that this was simply some local style employed by a carver in Tängelgårda. However, the deviations from what is found in the rest of the island are very striking, as is the odd grouping of these figures, and it is conceivable that these stones depict a gathering of *seiðmenn* or similar.

Queer perspectives on the sexual duality of Óðinn

One of the most striking elements of the *seiðr* complex is the strange position that Óðinn occupies, drawing upon himself the ultimate shame and dishonour of *ergi* while at the same time remaining the undisputed lord of the gods.

On the one hand this can be viewed in terms of Óðinn as a sexual being. The association of Óðinn with sexual power is not commonly made, especially by comparison with more obvious fertility deities such as Freyr and Freyja, but this aspect of his character is very clear in the sources (see de Vries 1931b for a full discussion of this, especially in relation to what were then called corn spirits). Again, we should not make the mistake of thinking of Óðinn as a 'god of war', or poetry, or sorcery, or any other single sphere: the shifting, indeed treacherous, nature of his gifts is the essence of what Óðinn seems to have been. When we consider the facets of his personality, we always find that he embodies each concept (war, for example) in such a way as to simultaneously enable him to be a god of everything else that he represents. Óðinn is thus a god of the mind whose power extends to the total destruction of the psyche, a god of war whose battle skills invade the thoughts of his opponents, a god of poetry in which all the other gifts are combined, above all a god not to be trusted.

All this is combined in Óðinn's sexual persona, and we should remember here that the Norse did not have deities of *love*, on the Roman model. The

fertility gods and goddesses of the North were at best powers of procreation, but more often simply patrons of sexual enjoyment. Thus Freyja has far more in common with the carnal violence of Aphrodite than the rather chaste sexuality of Venus, and it is in this light that we should also view Óðinn. Abandonment and frenzy are familiar concepts here, united in the feeling of sexual danger. Inherent in this understanding of divinely inspired sex is the notion that while a complete surrender to physical desire can bring destructive consequences, those following such a path may simply cease to care (the origin of the Trojan war provides a useful literary parallel, especially in the context of the Greek gods' provocative role in the affair). The Norse deities of sex revelled not only in sated lust, but also in the slaughter that was its occasional by-product.

Óðinn commits many acts of seduction and rape in the stories about him, and we should remember that several of his attributes or powers (such as the mead of poetry) are actually obtained through various kinds of sexual conquest, violence or deception. His *manvélar*, 'love-spells' in *Hárbarðzljóð* have been mentioned above, when he seduces a group of sorceresses and lures them away from their men. An even more graphic example is found in two of the charms catalogued in *Hávamál* (see McKinnell 2005a for further discussion of the sexual themes of the poem):

Þat kann ek it sextánda: ef ek vil ins svinna mans hafa geð allt ok gaman, hugi ek hverfi hvítarmri konu ok sný ek hennar ollum sefa.

Þat kann ek it sjautjánda, at mik mun seint firrask it manunga man; I know a sixteenth: if I want from a clever girl to have all her mind and love-pleasure, I turn the thoughts of the white-armed woman and I change her mind entirely.

I know a seventeenth, so that very late [*i.e.* never] will a maiden-young girl reject me; *Hávamál* 161–2; my translation

Jere Fleck (1971a: 398–411) has made some interesting observations about Óðinn as a sexual being in his studies of the hanging ritual on Yggdrasill, arguing for a consistent resonance between the 'divine liquids' associated with the god, namely blood, sperm and mead. Interpreting Óðinn's sacrifice as a kind of birth resulting from an impregnation (*ibid*: 401) may seem to be pushing the frames of analogy too far, but it *does* fit well with the general air of sexual ambiguity with which Óðinn was undoubtedly perceived. Interestingly, Clunies Ross (1994: 70) sees Óðinn's practice of *seiðr* as taking advantage of female resources – another dimension to his relentless quest for total knowledge.

Another line of approach sees Óðinn as the supreme example of a being also represented among the human practitioners of *seiðr* – the embodiment of a different gender. This idea of a special category of person whose socio-sexual identity was defined by notions of deviance from the norm and a range of unusual abilities, often sorcerous in nature, has a long history in shamanic studies, and it is this agenda which has been applied to the study of *seiðr*, Óðinn and *ergi*. These ideas have been expressed in various forms, from a third sex, discussion of an infinite range of genders in social negotiation, and more recently in terms of queer theory.

The fullest applications of this to *seiðr* studies have been made by Brit Solli (1998, 1999a & b, 2002, 2008), and Ing-Marie Back Danielsson (1999, 2002, 2007). Solli's work includes a number of important breakthroughs, not least in making one of the first explicit relations of *seiðr* to Viking-Age (as opposed to Migration Period) archaeology. She argues sensibly for a placement of *seiðr* in its complete social, religious, cultural and political context, and advocates a programme of widespread anthropological comparison. She follows Strömbäck, Ohlmarks, Dillmann and others into the sub-arctic/arctic shamanism debate, but is also careful to distinguish between Óðinnic *seiðr* and that of the sagas (1998: 20ff). Focusing on the same range of material presented earlier in this chapter, Solli concludes that there is clear evidence for a discrete gender of queer shamans, whose deviant activities were crucial for the definition of the normative in Viking-Age society (1999b: 423). I find some of her reasoning a little speculative – for example, I see no real evidence that the sexual stimulus sometimes associated with hanging in autoerotic acts can be seen as part of shamanic initiation rituals and the Óðinn cult (Solli 1998: 32f, 2002: ch. 6) – but the overall idea of such gender constructions is convincing. Above all, it is in queerness that Solli resolves, I think convincingly, the apparent contradictions in Óðinn's role as the masculine god of elites and simultaneous the master of the deviant arts of magic (*e.g.* Solli 2008).

Back Danielsson's work on the late Iron Age has focussed primarily on somatic themes of masking and identity in the figural scenes on gold foils, but this is only peripherally related to *seiðr* in a specific sense. This work is discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 8 below, concerning broader interpretations of shamanism in Scandinavia.

It should be pointed out that the innovation in these studies does not come from studies of sexual transgression, homosexuality or a third gender – all of

which had been taken up in Viking studies long before, as we have seen. This work instead draws these aspects of *seiðr* explicitly into the field of queer theory, and research into notions of deviancy and the normative (cf. Dowson 2000, 2006; Schmidt & Voss 2000; Reeder 2008; Geller 2009, 2017). Such an expansion of the parameters for our study of Old Norse sorcery is only to be welcomed.

The associations of these concepts to male sorcerers such as the *seiðmenn* have been reviewed above, but we should also consider here the implications of the term *seiðberendr*. Used as we have seen of the third type of sorcerers listed in *Hyndluljóð* 33, the term literally means '*seiðr*-carrier'. However, the suggestion was made by Strömbäck (1935: 27–31) that the suffix *-berendr* has connotations of extreme obscenity. Arguing from passages in the medieval law codes *Gulatingslagen* (NGL I: 70) and *Frostatingslagen* (NGL I: 225), he cites examples in which the word *berendi* is used to denote a female animal. On the evidence of a fifteenth-century medical text (Larsen 1931: 235), Strömbäck also suggested that *berendi*/*berandi* had a more specific meaning of the human female genitalia (1935: 31; he also notes the modern Icelandic slang *berandi*, meaning 'ass', 'backside' etc.).

This interpretation was also supported by Ohlmarks (1939: 340), the other main *seiðr*-scholar of the thirties. Ström (1974: 9) strengthened the idea by noting that even in its application to animals, *berendi* refers to the female genitalia, especially with regard to cows, and that it had connotations of something that is able to give birth. It was next taken up by Jochens (1996: 74), who extended the argument by suggesting that the person listed in *Hyndluljóð* as the progenitor of the *seiðberendr*, Svarthofði or 'Blackhead', is used as a synonym for female pubic hair. I can see no direct evidence for this. On the contrary, Strömbäck (1935: 27–8) notes its occurrence in medieval baptism records and argues that it should here be taken literally – the association of 'darkness' with sorcery is hardly surprising and occurs in a great many sagas, not to mention European literature in general. Even if Jochens' suggestion goes too far, we are left with the suggestion that *seiðberendr* combines the practice of sorcery with an obscene reference to the female genitalia, forming a term of considerable potency and potentially enormous *níð* if used of a man. However, we must exercise caution here, and remember that there is no *definite* association of *-berendr* with obscenity, as some have implied (*e.g.* Solli 1999a: 344). Richard North (1997: 50) has suggested that the term may best be translated 'womb-

bearer', thus cementing its associations with female fertility, and giving '*seiðr*-womb-bearer' for *seiðberendr*.

The evidence of Óðinn's complex sexuality, and the whole *ergi* complex, certainly implies that the Norse religion also involved the kinds of sexual ambiguities familiar from Siberia and North America and which we shall examine in the chapters following. However, it is hard to tell whether these took the form of new gender constructions or merely a blurring of existing boundaries. Solli seems convinced that the *seiðberendr* represents a third gender of transformed shaman (1998: 31f), but this interpretation rests ultimately on the speculative etymology of the word and on the idea that such a social category 'ought' to have existed. The term *seiðberendr* also occurs only in *Hyndluljóð* and it is probably a mistake to see it solely in the context of the *volur* and *vitkar*, for this ignores all the other terms for sorcerers discussed above. If we are to conceptualise the *Hyndluljóð* terms as three different gender categories, as Solli does (1998: 28), then this becomes very problematic in the light of all the others.

In the archaeology, the example of the couple buried at Klinta on Öland springs readily to mind. As we have seen, both individuals were buried with objects conventionally used as mortuary signals for the opposite sex. The association of the man with 'female' jewellery and needle-working tools is especially striking – if such a connection had been made in life in the form of an accusation, it would have certainly have been grounds for legal action at the most serious level, and possibly even a blood-feud. A similar grave has been found in a pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon context at Portway, Andover in southern England, where a body identified osteologically as that of a male was buried in female dress including a full set of jewellery (Wilson 1992: 96f; see Knüsel & Ripley 2000: 169–91 for further Anglo-Saxon examples).

Sexual performance and eroticism in seiðr

Grete Schmidt Poulsen (1986) has argued that the gender boundaries encoded in *seiðr* must reflect its original status as a practice of the Vanir gods, and that associations with the forces of sexuality and fertility are of primary importance. In this she implies some kind of social change, probably in the early Iron Age or even earlier, which lies behind the appropriation of this kind of sorcery by the Æsir – though the nature of this change is left unanswered. Katherine Morris (1991) has also conducted an extensive study of gender concepts in relation to the Old Norse magic-using woman, tracing the path of transforming attitudes from the seeresses and sorceress to the medieval concept of the witch. She argues

that the period of the sagas' composition viewed the witch as a lascivious, carnal figure of dangerous sexuality, and that this image has been projected onto the written sources as a distorting overlay (*ibid*: 172ff). Her analysis is firmly rooted in modern literary theory, and is problematic for our purposes here in that it generally considers creative archetype above ancient reality, but her conclusions are thought-provoking.

In view of the nature of the *ergi*-complex and its strong connections with the *seiðr* act, it seems reasonable to ask exactly what it was in the performance of the ritual that produced such an extreme system of taboos and associations.

One possibility is that the homoerotic connotations of male *ergi* might lead to a suggestion that *seiðr* involved real or symbolic acts of this kind – this is the line taken by most early interpreters (*e.g.* Lindquist 1923: 178), and implied as we have seen by Meulengracht Sørensen. Against this line of reasoning, which does not really fit all the circumstances of the *seiðr* rite as it appears in the sources, the American scholar Jenny Jochens has recently proposed an alternative:

One might venture, however, that the *seiðr* ceremony imitated heterosexual intercourse where the woman played her accustomed role of receiving, not the male member, but its substitute, the staff which was always the standard equipment of the human *volur* in charge of magic. In the minds of the creators of the mythological text, *seiðr* may have included masturbatory orgasm by the performer, but eventually only the staff remained as a symbol.

Jochens 1996: 74

There is in fact considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest that the rituals involved either literal or simulated sexual actions, in which the various kinds of staff played a major role as a phallic substitute or symbol. Firstly, the staffs themselves have phallic epithets. In *Bósa saga* 11, for example, we find that the word *gondull* is employed to mean 'penis', establishing a definite sexual connotation for the staff of the same name. We have seen above the relationship between the staffs and either the spirits that they summoned (*gondull – gandir*) or the people who used them (*volr – volva*), and in fact the famous *Volsa þáttr* episode reproduces the same pattern, with the penis *volsi* and the phallic deity of the same name (Tolley 1995a: 70).

Volsa þáttr appears in *Ólafs saga helga* in *Flateyjarbók* (265–6), which dates to the late 1300s; the source for the verses is given in the saga as *einu fornu kvæði*, 'an old chant' (no complete English translation of the poem exists, though a few verses appear in Turville-Petre 1964: 256f; I have worked from the original text in Finnur Jónsson's edition [Skjaldedigtning BII: 237–9], with the assistance of further partial translations into Norwegian [Steinsland & Vogt 1981] and English via German [Heusler 1991]). The prose of the saga relates how the Christian king Ólafr tours areas of northern Norway to assess the problems posed by the continuance of pagan practices. He comes to the dwelling of an extended family of farmers, and there observes a curious sexual ritual apparently intended to ensure fertility. According to the saga, this had begun several months prior to the royal visit when the family had slaughtered a fat draught-horse. The thrall who had killed the animal tried to throw away the horse's phallus (*vingull*) but it was retrieved by the son of the family, who took it indoors and brandished it in front of his mother, sister and a female thrall, with the verse:

Hér meguð sjá	Here you can see
heldr roskligan	a good stout *vingull*
vingul skorinn	chopped off from
af viggs foður	the horse's father.
Þér er, ambátt,	For you, serving-maid,
þessi Volsi	this *Volsi* [phallus] will be
allódaufligr	lively enough
innan læra.	between the thighs.

Volsa þáttr str. 2; Tr. Turville-Petre 1964: 256f The mother then seized the *vingull*, crying that it should not go to waste. She carefully dried it and wrapped it in linen, preserving it with leeks or onions (*laukar*) and herbs of some kind,

and stored it in her chest. Every evening thereafter she takes out the phallus and mutters a formula to it. The accompanying prose text continues, *at hon vendir þangat til ollum sínum átrúnaði ok heldr hann fyrir guð sinn*, 'and in it she placed all her faith and held it to be her god'. It is said to grow in size, and could stand up beside the house-wife if she wished. The object is passed from person to person around the table in order of status, each speaking a verse. Later, when the king and his men arrive disguised and have been settled at table, the woman of the house brings in the *Volsi* and unwraps it. At the start of the ritual we are told, *Aukinn ertu Uolse*, 'empowered are you Volsi'. As it is passed round, the verses begin; each ends with a formula passing the object to the next person and asking that 'Maurnir' (Mornir?) accept the sacrifice.

The men appear relatively passive towards the phallus, but some of the women's verses have a strong sexual content, for example that spoken by the female thrall after she receives the *Volsi*:

Víst eigi mættak	I certainly could not
við of bindask	refrain from
í mik at keyra	thrusting him inside me
ef ein lægim	if we were lying alone
í andkætu	in mutual pleasure

Volsa þáttr str. 9; tr. Jochens 1996: 47 with my amendments That this masturbatory image should be taken literally is shown by a graphic remark in strophe 6, as the phallus is passed to the daughter of the house, *þær skulu vingull / væta í aptan*, 'they shall make wet / the *vingull* tonight'. She refuses to take the object, as she is the only one present who has seen through the king's disguise, and then passes it on to the female thrall who speaks as above.

Once considered to be relatively early in origin (cf. Heusler 1991 [1903]), the dating of *Volsa þáttr* was steadily revised and later came to be seen as a creation of the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (Düwel 1971). Turville-Petre viewed the poem as essentially an exercise in bawdy humour, reading like "a sophisticated author's burlesque of 'goings-on' among illiterate peasants living on a remote headland of northern Norway" (1964: 256). This view of the poem was supported in 1972 by Herbert Joseph, though he argued that at least some measure of genuine tradition lay behind the narrative. However, this interpretation has been challenged by Steinsland & Vogt (1981) who have published the only recent

analysis of the episode, where they discuss its problematic construction and dating, together with a convincing deconstruction of the rite itself. In brief, the text is argued to have been part of an originally larger work, and adapted by the saga-writer; some strophes are older than others, and some have been altered.

The only securely early aspects of the text appear to be the ritual formulations about Mornir, the antiquated word-forms (*Volsi*, *vingull* etc) and the sexual associations. However, several other early elements can be perceived in the text, such as the idea of a ritual horse sacrifice (as opposed to the common slaughter proposed by the saga-writer). Another primary aspect of *Volsa þáttr* would appear to be the prominence of leeks and herbs, again with sexual overtones (see Lehmann 1955). The phrase *lina laukar* – 'linen and onions/leeks' – is mentioned in one of the strophes as well as in the saga prose, and the same formula has also been found as a runic inscription on a meat scraper found in a fifth-century female grave at Fløkstad in Norway (Eitrem 1924). This has been taken by Gro Steinsland (1985a) and Tove Hjørungdal (1989, 1990) as evidence for a long tradition behind the *volur* of the Viking Age; Tolley (2009b) takes a sharply divergent view, arguing for the poem as a largely Christian construction, but this finds little support in the contextual comparisons of its ritual components.

In *Volsa þáttr* it is also interesting that the private cult of the house is depicted as being clearly under female control, especially that of the mother who is here tentatively identified as a *volva* (Steinsland & Vogt 1981: 90f, 103f). This is reinforced by another episode that is of crucial importance for the suggestion that the poem does contain genuine Viking-Age elements. As discussed above, the king throws the phallus to the dog in an attempt to spoil the pagan ritual. Following this in strophe 13, the woman asks the men to lift her up over the door-hinges and the door-lintel, so that she can see into some kind of other world and thus retrieve the sacrifice. The parallel with Ibn Fadlan's *Risāla* has been reviewed above in the context of ritual architecture, but has wider implications. Curiously, the common element in these two texts has gone virtually un-noticed, being mentioned in passing in only three papers (Steinsland & Vogt 1981: 103f, from which Andrén 1993a: 37 and Lund Warmind 1995: 134 have worked). This correspondence is actually of immense importance for Viking studies. With an admitted risk for circular arguments, on the one hand it suggests that we should take *Volsa þáttr* more seriously as a source for Viking-Age ritual, while on the other confirming that Ibn Fadlan's account really does describe the mortuary behaviour of Scandinavians. I have already emphasised the fundamental

importance of this text, and this surprising link in a description of such a specific ritual activity only serves to strengthen this contention (see Price 2019 for further layers of connection with the Ibn Fadlan ceremonies).

Lastly, a link to Óðinn may also be dimly discerned in *Volsa þáttr*, because Ólafr and his companions all take the same name of the god for their disguise: Grímr or 'masked one'. The possible sorcerous overtones of this name have been discussed above. The tensions in the poem between 'Grímr' and the woman of the house would thus reflect the *ergi*-loaded role of Óðinn as the male master of *seiðr*, and the constant friction seen between the god and the various *volur* that he summons back from death in the Eddic corpus. This supports the idea that the woman in *Volsa þáttr* is indeed a *volva*.

The identity of Mornir is also a problem. Folke Ström in his essay on fertility cults (1954: 24ff) argues for a plural feminine meaning, and associations with the *dísir*; Turville-Petre (1964: 257f) instead sees a singular meaning of 'sword', with phallic connotations and links to Freyr; Steinsland & Vogt (1981: 89, 96) favour an interpretation formerly rejected by Heusler, namely that it refers to giantesses.

• Most important for our purposes here are the following: the penis is personified (even deified) as Volsi, probably a derivative of *volr*, 'staff' (Turville-
•Petre 1964: 317) it is carefully conserved with herbs that may themselves have
•functions connected with sexual potency the phallus is in the care of a woman, possibly a *volva*, who also presides over the ritual; it is to women that the ritual is
• •primarily directed the penis is the main item of 'equipment' used in the rite it is believed to increase in size during the rite (strophe 4, *Aukinn ertu Uolse*), and
•to acquire a degree of independence in two or three instances (strophes 1, 9 and possibly 6) there are explicit references to its use for masturbation Although obscured by the medieval saga-writer's filter, there seems little doubt that *Volsa þáttr* does contain early elements, and indeed offers us a rare detailed glimpse of the explicit sexual realities of everyday Viking-Age ritual. It may well be that as Steinsland & Vogt suggest (1981: 103), the horse phallus is actually a cultic equivalent of the *volva*'s staff (or vice versa), an idea considerably strengthened by the *Volsi*/*volr*/*volva* sequence (see also Rosén 1914).

The notion of a horse's phallus may also have been of specific relevance, for there are a number of faint sexual associations between northern women and animals in a sorcerous context (see Morris 1991: ch. 3). Some of these are from later sources, such as the twelfth-century *Historia Ecclesiæ Eliensis*, an English

chronicle which like the sagas relates the events of an earlier time. In one passage, the text relates how the wife of the Anglo-Saxon King Edgar (reigned 959–75) was accused of witchcraft, and specifically of changing into horse-form. Witnessed by a bishop, her behaviour had clear sexual elements, as when he saw her "running and leaping hither and thither with horses and showing herself shamelessly to them" (*Historia Ecclesiæ Eliensis* II: 56; Davidson 1964: 122). Disregarding the specific context, the form of the sorcery is interesting here. In the Norse sources, we may compare this with other animal imagery for allegations of sexual misconduct, as when the giantess Hyndla accuses Freyja of running out at night "in heat like Heiðrún among the he-goats" (Heiðrún is the nanny-goat of the gods; *Hyndluljóð* 46f).

Other phallic associations of the sorcerer's staff appear more far-fetched. Jochens (1996: 259 n92) argues that the 'insult poles' (*níðstong*), used to make allegations of effeminacy or homosexuality, can also be taken through their form to be analogues for the sexual connotations of the staff. I can find no indication in the sources that the fact of the pole itself had any relevance to the meaning of the *níð*. The idea of 'wood-*níð*' surely refers to the medium of the insult – material rather than verbal – and not to the imaginary phallic symbolism of the pole.

Further pole-symbolism has been touched upon by Tolley (1995a: 70), who considers that the act of summoning the *gandir* (*i.e.* using the staff) was one of the aspects of *seiðr* that was found sexually deviant. Indeed, an obvious sexual connotation can also be found in the metaphors of 'riding' discussed above, especially in relation to staffs and the *gandreið*. From here it is, again, but a short step to the suggestion that some form of literal or simulated erotic performance may have been part of the *seiðr* and *gandr* rituals, once more centred on the phallic associations of the staff.

The same terminology is also taken up by Jochens, who chooses a different sexual gloss on *Voluspá* 22/4. For *vítti hón ganda* she adopts Hugo Pipping's translation 'to influence the penis through magic' (Pipping 1928: 71), though she admits other interpretations are possible (Jochens 1996: 260). This idea of sorcery used to cause impotence was endorsed and further developed through *Voluspá* 23 by Rolf Pipping (1928a), whose interpretation was accepted by de Vries (1962; see also Jochens' 1989 review of sexual themes in *Voluspá*).

A different kind of sexual take on the 'penetrative' aspects of *seiðr* has been proposed by Margaret Clunies Ross (1994: 209). In her book *Prolonged Echoes*,

she argues that if this kind of sorcery truly was shamanic, then we can see the act of spirit possession in terms of a woman allowing herself to be entered. This interpretation is convincing, but at the same time highly problematic in that there is no real evidence for such possession taking place in *seiðr*, as we have seen above.

We may also see a sexual connotation in the name of the renegade leader of the *seiðmenn* in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, the king's son Rognvaldr réttilbeini who has been discussed above. His nickname may mean simply 'straight-limbed', but Hugo Pipping (1928c: 74) again supplies a phallic gloss in his suggestion that it refers instead to an erect penis. There is a colloquial sense here, and the sorcerer's name would thus mean something like Rognvaldr Hard-On, which would clearly fit with the sexual aspects of male *seiðr*.

Clearly there is a considerable body of sexual imagery connected with *seiðr* and its performance. Tolley (1995a: 70) effectively makes the point that none of this should surprise us, due to the general climate of "sexual anarchy" that attaches to the Vanir deities throughout the Old Norse myth cycle. The prime example of this is naturally Freyja, the original mistress of *seiðr*, who was notorious even amongst the gods for her incestuous relationships and liasons with a range of beings (her sexuality is discussed by Boyer 1995: 49–57 and Näsström 1995: 65ff, 104–10).

These associations can also be seen reflected in the material culture. The possible Freyja figurine on the pendant from Aska in Hagebyhöga, discussed above, may have sexual connotations in two specific respects beyond the general aura of carnality that attached to the goddess. Firstly, if the prominent necklace worn by the figure is meant to be the Brísingamen, then we should remember that Freyja won it only by agreeing to sleep with each of the four dwarf smiths who forged it. Another such association may be found in the figure's prominent stomach, which may indicate pregnancy (Arrhenius 2001: 306).

Probably the most famous sexual image in Nordic material culture of the Viking Age is the unique bronze statuette found at Rällinge in Södermanland, Sweden (Fig. 3.108). Measuring approximately 10 cm in height, the figure depicts a bearded and moustachioed man sitting cross-legged, naked except for a bracelet and a conical helmet. His right arm is clasping his beard, while his left rests on his leg. The man has a prominent erection, and his genitalia have been sculpted in detail. In almost every work on Norse religion this figurine is suggested as representing the god Freyr, due to the obvious connotations of

virility, and while this may be the case it is nevertheless important to stress that this is nothing more than assumption. The figure may equally represent a different god, another notoriously libidinous supernatural being such as a dwarf, or any other kind of ‘spirit’ creature. It may even represent a human being, such as a king or other chieftain with a role to play in maintaining communal fertility. It is clearly an object of specific meaning, and once again serves to emphasise a focus on sexuality in the Norse thought-world (I have written further on this figurine in the wider context of Norse attitudes to sex and sexuality, Price 2004d, 2005e, 2006b).





Fig. 3.108 The bronze ithyphallic figurine from Rällinge in Södermanland, Sweden (photo Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).



Fig. 3.109 Three views of a carved wooden phallus, broken at the base, found in the main rampart of the Danevirke, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (after Hellmuth Andersen et al. *1976: Fig. 104).*

One piece of supporting evidence for the identification of the Rällinge figurine with Freyr is Adam of Bremen's famous description of the Uppsala temple in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (IV: 26). Describing the idol of the god 'Fricco' alongside those of Óðinn and Þórr, he mentions that he is shown *cum ingenti priapo*, 'with a huge phallus', and that 'shameless' songs and performances characterise the festivities there. Adam's text has been much discussed, but the existence of such idols is hardly in doubt (for a very wide range of continental European parallels for ithyphallic wooden figures, see van der Sanden & Capelle 2002).

We also have more material hints at what form these figures might take, as seen in a remarkable discovery from Schleswig-Holstein, today part of Germany but originally in southern Denmark. In 1972, excavations in the main rampart of the Danevirke at Thyraborg uncovered a carved wooden phallus, a find unique of its kind (Hellmuth Andersen *et al.* 1976: 58; Fig. 3.109). Dated contextually to

the beginning of the ninth century, the object was 23 cm long when found but was broken at the base, having once been larger. From its form the phallus seems to have been depicted erect. The carving may once have been part of an effigy of some kind, perhaps the image of a fertility deity as Graham-Campbell suggests (1980a: 153), or it may have been complete in itself – either as some kind of personal charm or even intended for practical use. The context of the find is interesting, being buried in the matrix of the main defensive fortification for the Danish kingdom. The phallus may have found its way there as part of dumped landfill, though it seems a strange object to simply throw away. Alternatively there may have been some symbolic meaning, perhaps related to protection or defence, encoded in its placement in the rampart (a suggestion also put forward by Kolstrup 1975: 168).

The possibility that such objects may actually have been used in the rituals should not be discounted. In discussing the presence of literal sexual performance in *seiðr*, we should always remember that we *know* that such practices certainly formed a part of at least some Viking-Age rituals. The confirmation of this comes, of course, from Ibn Fadlan, whose eye witness account of a ship burial has been mentioned above. Again, we shall not review all the complexities of the rituals described, but in brief we can merely note that the enslaved woman who has allegedly volunteered to be sacrificed performs a succession of sexual acts. Firstly, during the nine days of preparatory rituals after her master dies she sleeps with the men of the camp. Later, immediately after the body of her lord has been placed in the funeral ship and a number of animals sacrificed, she goes “to and fro from one tent to another, and the man of each tent had intercourse with her and said, ‘Tell your master that I have done this out of love for him’.” (trans. after Foote & Wilson 1980: 409). Later on, after she has apparently drunk some kind of intoxicant or soporific, and been taken to the tent on board where the dead man lies, six men follow and each has sex with her. These same men are also her executioners, as immediately thereafter four of them hold her arms and legs while the other two strangle her; simultaneously, the old, heavily-built woman who presides over the ceremony stabs the slave-girl with a knife.

We must be cautious with this description, in that it is uncertain to what extent the rituals of the Rus’ on their wanderings resembled those undertaken in the Scandinavian homelands. In the past it has been questioned whether the people that Ibn Fadlan met actually were Scandinavians, but in view of the sheer

weight of comparative material this no longer seems a viable position to maintain. So many aspects of the dress, material culture and funerary rites are closely paralleled in Scandinavian archaeological finds and literary sources that we may confidently consider them in the present context. The slave-woman has sexual congress with at least six men and probably many more, in two distinct sessions both individually and collectively on the day of the funeral, and on several more occasions in the preceding days. In this light, the suggestion of significant carnal elements to the *seiðr* ritual is not at all unusual.

In several works Gro Steinsland (*e.g.* 1992, 1997) has argued for erotic overtones in Nordic death rituals, extending her idea of different levels of sexual congress – both literal and symbolic – between otherworldly entities and either gods and/or elites. The idea of the divine marriage is important here, and adds a further element of sexual charge to Viking-Age negotiations with supernatural powers.

There are also hints of such connotations in the archaeology of the pre-Viking period. An example of this is the fifth- to sixth-century picture stone from Smiss III in När parish on Gotland, with its motif of three animals intertwined in a triskele with a seated figure beneath (Lindqvist 1955; Fig. 3.110). The figure appears to be female and naked, sitting with legs spread wide apart and with arms crooked, holding two snakes or dragons in her hands. She appears to have either an elaborate hairstyle, or perhaps some kind of head-dress. As discussed above in the context of the Klinta pendant, the Smiss image has been interpreted as showing Celtic influence (Lindqvist 1955: 45–8; Arwidsson 1963: 166–71) and also as an imitation of Continental motifs of Daniel in the lions' den (Arrhenius & Holmqvist 1960: 185–8). While some similarities of image can be seen here, it must be stressed that none of the above sources provides a fully convincing parallel. Nylén & Lamm (1987: 40f) have instead seen the figure as some kind of 'snake-witch'. This is far more in keeping with the kinds of sorceresses that we have examined in this chapter, nor would the animals would be out of place here. Only Lindqvist has commented on the woman's apparent nudity, and her body posture could also be interpreted in a sexual light.



Fig. 3.110 Picture-stone III from Smiss, När parish, Gotland, dated AD 400–600 (photo by Berig, Creative Commons).

The sexual themes in *seiðr* also extend not only to the performance of the rituals, but also to their purpose which was often erotic in nature. The functions of this kind of sorcery have been summarised by Kieckhefer in his study of erotic magic in medieval Europe (1991: 31):

Erotic magic could be used to induce a person to become a sexual partner ("sex-inducing magic"), to encourage an intimate and lasting amorous relationship

("love-magic"), or to enhance the sexual experience of partners who were already willing ("sex-enhancing magic"). Magic could, of course, also serve various gynaecological purposes such as contraception, abortion, promotion of fertility, and ease of childbirth. It was also used to discern whether or not a woman was a virgin, or whether she was faithful.

Most of these can be found in the literary descriptions of *seiðr*, as can their corollaries. In *Kormáks saga* (6), for example, it is used to prevent a sexual union between a couple; in *Njáls saga* (6), we see another of Queen Gunnhildr's malicious spells when she avenges herself on a man who has spurned her, by working magic that will induce impotence whenever he is with a woman that he truly loves (there are many parallels with later medieval erotic charms, *e.g.* Mitchell 1998). A similar act of *seiðr* is worked by a woman named Tórdís in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* (11), and the idea of sexual seduction as one of the magical skills of a female practitioner is also found frequently in the sources. Perhaps the most dramatic example, from *Volsunga saga* 7, is discussed in more detail in chapter 6 below: by means of *seiðr*, two women exchange outward appearances and each initiate sexual encounters, one of which is incestual.

Quite apart from the content of the rituals, even the 'everyday' activities of a *volva*, such as peripatetic prophecy-for-hire, have been seen as having sexual overtones at a general level. We see this for example in *Voluspá* 22, when Gullveig-Heiðr's work as a seeress seduces humanity away from the Vanir's teachings and into the obscene mysteries of *seiðr* (Dronke 1997: 42).

In 1962 Vilhelm Kiil put forward the rather unusual idea that the *volur* were actually a form of ritual sex-workers, somewhat similar to the priestesses of Ishtar in prehistoric Mesopotamia, converting sexual favours into supernatural power. He based this suggestion on the general sexual associations of *seiðr* that we have seen, and interpreted the *ergi* complex to mean that any act of such magic was inevitably carnal in nature. In itself this is close to Jochens' position, but taken further to portray the sexual requirements of the rituals in an almost professional light. Freyja's notorious promiscuity is cited as supporting evidence, and Kiil also takes her 'hostess' role for the warrior dead to imply some kind of sexual service (*ibid*: 170). Similarly, the various heroic poems in the Eddic corpus that mention a love affair between a mortal and a *valkyrja* are extended to imply that "besides serving ale to the *einherjar* they were also supposed to give sexual pleasure to these chosen warriors" (*ibid*: 169). While this ritual prostitution is surely an over-interpretation, Kiil should be nevertheless be given

credit as one of the first scholars who understood the importance of sexual elements in Nordic sorcery, as he went on to make a connection with Ibn Fadlan and the accounts of Sámi erotic magic that we shall see in the next chapter.

There is no doubt, at least, that the *volur* were regarded as sexually dangerous. In *Hávamál* 113, we read that a man should never sleep in the arms of *fjolkunnigri konu*, 'a woman skilled in magic', because she will lay a charm on all his limbs (again, the idea of fettering the body that we have seen in Óðinn's names and his sorcerous skills). Through the sexual fog that they could lay upon a man's mind, such women were also said to cause the neglect of daily concerns, troubled dreams and a general decline in health. This is exactly what happens to King Haraldr when he is enchanted by the Sámi sorceress Snæfríðr in *Haralds saga hárfagra*, an episode recounted below in chapter 4.

Similarly in *Volsunga saga* 7, the *seiðkona* (or rather her physical appearance, because it is in fact another woman who has taken on her form) seems irresistible to the object of the spell, a man who finds her to be 'a fine and handsome woman', from whom he cannot take his eyes. It is perhaps in this kind of context that we should think of the henbane pouch carried by the woman from Fyrkat. Even in later periods we find similar patterns, as in the above-mentioned Bergen court case in which the statement about *gonduls andar* was made – the alleged witch was on trial for having made a charm that prevented another woman from having sex with a certain man (Tolley 1995a: 70).

This ability to induce attraction, or to draw the victim in some way closer to the *seiðr*-worker, could also take a form that had sexual overtones but a totally different outcome. We see this in *Sorla saga sterka* (4), when a cave-dwelling female troll and her mate boast about their constant supply of food. This is explained by their use of *seiðr* to attract whole ships' crews of men, the latter being drawn to the trolls in a clearly suggestive manner, and presumably ending up in the pot. Male practitioners may also have been able to lure female beings in this way, as in *Nikulás saga leikara* (10) when a *seiðmaðr* uses sorcery to steal away a man's *fylgja*, causing him terrible harm. This is an extremely late source, but the idea is interestingly close to the pattern that we have seen above.

Seiðr and the concept of the soul

We have reviewed the different components of the Norse 'soul' in chapter 2, and it is in relation to this conception of the human personality that the mechanics of *seiðr* can best be understood. In many ways, this form of sorcery was actually

dependent on the ability to separate aspects of the self, and to send them away on one's errands. As we shall see in chapter 5, this is also one of the main reasons why the *seiðr* complex has been discussed in terms of shamanic belief systems. Linked to this, one of the key elements in an assessment of *seiðr* in such a context must be the existence of helping spirits, of the kind that we shall see below in Sámi religion and circumpolar ritual.

Helping spirits in seiðr

One variety of these, the *verðir*, has been discussed already in connection with the *varðlok(k)ur* songs used to attract them. However, discussion of such beings in a Nordic context has most often focused around the term *gandr*, a word with many meanings of which one ('stick' or 'staff') has been reviewed above.

An example of the way in which *gandr*, or its plural *gandir*, occurs in the early sources can be seen in *Voluspá* 22 and 29. We have seen several readings of this, but in Ursula Dronke's translation we find another very different interpretation:

Heiði hana héto hvars til húsa kom, volo vel spá – vitti hón ganda. Seið hón kunni, seið hón leikin. Æ var hón angan illrar brúðar.	Bright Heiðr they called her at all the houses she came to, a good seer of fair fortunes – she conjured spirits who told her. *Seiðr* she had skill in, *seiðr* she practised, possessed. She was ever the darling of an evil wife.
Valði henne Herfoðr hringa ok men. Fé[kk] spioll spaklig ok spáganda: sá hón vítt ok um vítt – of verold hveria.	War Sire [Óðinn] chose for her rings and necklaces. He got wise news and spirits of prophecy. She saw far, and far beyond – over every world.

Voluspá 22, 29; text and translation after Dronke (1997: 12–13, 15) In this context the term is seen in the plural, and is interpreted by Dronke as referring not to wands but to spirits of some kind. She is here following a perspective once again first put forward by Fritzner (1877: 166–70), based on the famous passage in the *Historia Norvegiae* that describes a Sámi shamanic séance. Here we can concern ourselves just with the passages that mentions the *gandus*, which is explained as follows:

Sunt namque quidam ex ipsis, qui quasi prophetae a stolido vulgo venerantur, quoniam per immundum spiritum, quem *gandum* vocitant, multis multa praesagia ut eveniunt quandoque percunctati praedicent.

There are some of these [Sámi sorcerers] who are revered as if they were prophets by the ignorant commoners, because by means of a foul spirit, which they call a *gandus*, when asked they will predict for many people many future events, and when they will come to pass.

Historia Norvegiae 85–86; my translation and italics

As we have seen, the commentator then goes on to describe a trance ritual and its results, in which the *gandus* takes part. It is here, however, that we encounter a number of problems with the interpretation of the séance in a Norse context. The *Historia Norvegiae* gives an account of a Sámi ritual, but from the perspective of a Norwegian who not only does not understand all that he sees, but who also interprets this using terms and points of reference from his own culture rather than that of the Sámi. Tolley (1993: 360–76; 1994; 1995a: 62–5) has analysed the way in which the writer perceived the *gandus*: it is an unclean spirit it functions as a helping spirit to the *noaidi*, in a symbiotic relationship with him (harm to the *gandus* results in harm to its owner) it tells the *noaidi* future events (and ones taking place in the present but far away), and retrieves distant objects it can steal people's souls it travels by means of supernatural 'vehicles', such as ships or snow-shoes, or bridled reindeer that it rides it can take on animal shape or transform itself into 'inanimate' objects The primary question here must be to what extent this reflects the nature of spirits involved in the Sámi ritual that the writer was describing, or to what extent it is instead based upon the *gandir* of the Norse.

Dronke's translation of *spáganda* in *Voluspá* 29/3–4 as 'spirits of prophecy' (1997: 15) becomes more convincing when we consider that the whole poem is saturated with spirits. Indeed, an intimate dialogue between a *volva* and her helping spirit may in fact be present throughout *Voluspá*, reflected in the alternating pronouns *ek* and *hón* (first and third person singular) used to relate the seeresses' narrative voices (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1962: 324). Dronke elegantly relates this to the world-view that the creator of *Voluspá* was trying to convey:
The poet is preparing us for a poetic world of heightened imagination, in which *volur*, reincarnated, remembered their former lives, gazed in trance at the hidden

habitations of the cosmos, spoke with spirits under the night sky, had constantly close to them, talking, a ‘she’, a second self, another being, who communicated her own experiences. The poet creates this haunting, reverberating atmosphere well.

Dronke 1997: 27

The question as to whether *Voluspá* features one *volva* or two has occupied philologists for many years, with opinion on the subject remaining divided (see Wessén 1927: 75ff and Höckert 1930: 105ff for an early debate, and McKinnell 2001 for related issues here). In this light it makes considerable sense to interpret strophe 29 as recording Óðinn’s receipt of helping spirits from the *volva* he has summoned. Dronke (1997: 28f) suggests that the two aspects of the *volva* represent didactic and prophetic aspects of her nature: “‘I’ will be the living, teaching *volva*, who reveals to men her occult knowledge, ‘she’ the prophetic *volva*, who plays a vital part in the lives of the gods themselves”. These two aspects of the seeress can also be linked to the present and the past respectively, though the recollections of the spirit-*volva* are related in the immediate present tense as the urgency of her message increases (cf. strophes 21, 27, 31, 55–6). The *Voluspá* poet also built in a great many more layers that play on this dichotomy, such as the contrast between the prophetic *volva*’s underworld of silence, and her didactic counterpart’s residence in the living world of speech, a boundary which the two occasionally transgress into each other’s worlds (see Dronke 1997: 27–30 for a superb discussion of the poem’s sibylline voices).

Another explanation for the third-person *volva* could also relate to the idea of an assistant spirit, but not necessarily a dimension of the living seeress. If there are in fact two separate *volur* in the poem, one living interrogating another one dead, then this would also fit an idea of a sorceress in a working relationship with the spirit of a dead predecessor – a phenomenon common in the circumpolar area.

Whatever the nature of the *gandir*, the manner of summoning them is more problematic. Several scholars, such as Tolley (1995a: 67) prefer to see *Voluspá* 22’s *vítti hón ganda* as meaning that the *volva* drew the spirits to her with a drum, but such a translation for this verb that occurs nowhere else in Old Norse is problematic. Dronke (1997: 132, following Hugo Pipping’s 1930 etymology) relates it to the *vítt* prohibited by the twelfth-century Norwegian laws mentioned above. The same meaning of ‘device for sorcery’ appears in the *vítta véttr*, the

‘creature of magic tools’ used to attack the kings in *Ynglingatal* (see chapter 6). The translation ‘she conjured spirits who told her’ used by Dronke for *Voluspá* 22 adequately covers the prophetic nature of the *gandir* and the generally sorcerous means of their summoning. It is not impossible that a drum was used, as we have seen, but the evidence must be regarded as slim. Tolley’s arguments for the use of a *gondull* staff for summoning the *gandir* have already been reviewed.

How were the *gandir* used? Here another pattern that has become familiar reappears, as it is clear that the spirits were first summoned and then unleashed. We see this very graphically in *Fóstbræðra saga* 9, when Þordís awakes from troubled dreams and announces:

Víða hefi ek gondum rennt í nótt, ok em ek nú vís orðin þeira hluta, er ek vissa ekki áðr.

I have caused *gandir* to run far in the night, and I have now become wise about those things that I did not know before.

Fóstbræðra saga 9; translation after Tolley 1995a: 67

Tolley is the first to have interpreted the passage in this way, in line with his discussion of helping spirits, whereas earlier commentators have usually read the line to mean that ‘I have run far with *gandir* in the night’ (*e.g.* Bø 1960). In either case, it is clear that the *gandir* were sent with a purpose, and both here and in *Voluspá* this is to return to their sender with information about far-off events or the future.

There is much to indicate that the *gandir* spirits at least sometimes took animal form. Firstly the term is found in a number of kennings: *hallar gandr* (‘hall wolf’) for ‘fire’; *selju gandr* (‘willow wolf’) and *storðar gandr* (‘coppice wolf’), both for ‘wind’ (Meissner 1921: 100ff; Tolley 1995a: 167). The connections between wolves and sorcery, in the role as the mounts of the female ‘Riders’ discussed above, has already been established. Another explicit use of *gandr* for wolf comes in a particularly complex thirteenth-century word-play by Sturla Þórðarson, in which the term *gandreið*, a ‘riding of *gandir*’ (see chapter 6) is used to introduce a sword kenning and to suggest the movement of the blade through the air:

En gandreið	The ride of the wolf [*gandreið*]
grænna skjalda	of green shields [sword]
Svolnis vegg	cut Svolni’s (shield)wall

sleit ó lopti. up in the air.

Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða* 23; trans. Tolley 1995a: 68

Gandir thus appear to have been wolf spirits, and we should here remember the wolfish *gonduls andar*, 'breaths of the *gondull*', discussed in the section on staffs above. Other animal forms are also recorded, for example in the kenning *Jormungandr*, 'Mighty *gandr*', which is used for the World Serpent in the Ragnarok description of *Voluspá* 47. In the mid-ninth-century praise poem *Ragnarsdrápa*, the same kenning appears again, but is immediately followed by o*ndurr*, 'snow shoe' which as Tolley (1995a: 68) suggests echoes the connection between *gandir* and means of transport, exactly as in the *Historia Norvegiae*.

The debate on *gandr* as spirit or staff is encapsulated by a passage from the late thirteenth- or fourteenth-century *Þiðriks saga af Bern* 352, which is not an original Old Norse composition but instead builds entirely on Continental traditions. This is one of the rare medieval saga passages that acknowledges the retrospective time-frame of its own composition:

… hans kona Ostacia ferr út ok hrærði sinn gand. Þat kollum vér, at hún færi at seiða, svá sem gert var í forneskju, at fjolkunngar konur, þær vér kollum volur, skyldu seiða honum seið.

… his wife Ostacia goes out and moves her *gandr*. This performance we identify as the practice of *seiðr*, as it would have been done in ancient times, by women knowledgable in sorcery that were known as *volur*, and we would say that she practised *seiðr* for him.

Translation after Jochens 1996: 259, with author's amendments

Here the *gandr* could be interpreted both ways (though perhaps 'staff' seems more likely in the context). Considering the ultimate source of the text, it is interesting to find *gandr*, *seiðr* and the *volur* combined in this way.

In all these rituals, the role of spirits is central. If Tolley is correct, these took two primary forms (1995a: 71–3). The *gandir* were animal spirits, mostly wolves but occasionally serpents, summoned – perhaps with the aid of a *gondull* staff – during a *seiðr* performance or while their master slept, and sent out to obtain information or to do injury to the sender's enemies. Another form of *gandr* were more physical wolf-spirits that the *volur* or *seiðkonur* actually rode in their own

ethereal forms. While the *gandir* correspond to the helping spirits of Sámi religion and much circumpolar belief, the *verðir* by contrast appear to have fulfilled a more protective role. They seem to have been invoked by the *varðlok(k)ur* chants at the start of a *seiðr* performance (as in *Eiríks saga rauða*), and while they could also obtain information for the sender they could probably not carry out specific missions.

In contrast to the *fylgjur* and *hamingjur* described above, the *gandir* and *verðir* fit precisely into the category of helping spirits familiar from shamanic belief systems in the circumpolar region, and considerably strengthen the incorporation of *seiðr* and its related rituals into this arena of study.

The domestic sphere of *seiðr*

On repeated occasions in the preceding pages we have seen evidence of the use of *seiðr* and other forms of Norse sorcery for violent ends. These will be discussed at length in chapter 6, but in focusing on these aspects of magic we should not forget that they form only one part of the *seiðr* complex, alongside many other functions.

Clive Tolley (1995a: 58) has argued that *seiðr*'s functions were twofold, what he calls *divinatory* and *efficatory*. Although divination is certainly a category of *seiðr* in its own right, and that most especially associated with the *volur*, it seems an unnecessarily blunt analysis that divides these rituals into 'divination' and 'everything else' (though Tolley does use these terms primarily to distinguish between the nature of the processes rather than the specific results that they achieve). At this point it is appropriate to summarise some of these objectives that group within what we might call the 'domestic' sphere of *seiðr*.

• Suggested functions of 'domestic' Nordic sorcery: foretelling the future
••(divination) bestowing good fortune (blessing) bestowing bad fortune
•••(cursing) manipulating the weather attracting game animals or fish healing
••the sick causing mild harm to people, animals or property
•communicating/mediating with the dead communicating/mediating with the
•unseen world(s) communicating/mediating with the gods?

Some of these have been examined above, such as the various forms of communication with other worlds, and the more aggressive functions of cursing

and causing injury. To fill out this picture we can briefly summarise some of the evidence for the other applications to which *seiðr* could be put.

Divination and revealing the hidden

The major role played in the work of the Nordic sorceresses by divination, prophecy and clairvoyance has been a constant feature of all the written sources, as we have seen (Słupecki 1998a provides an effective survey; see also Raudvere 2001: 120–7). In various contexts above, we have considered the classic literary examples of the *volur*'s divination rituals – in *Eiríks saga rauða, Hrólfs saga kraka, Vatnsdæla saga, Víga-Glúms saga, Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar, Norna-Gests þáttr* and the rest. In *Vatnsdæla saga* (10) there is also an account of a *seiðr* divination identical in every way to the classic pattern except that instead of a *volva* the sorceress concerned is a *fjolkunnig* Sámi woman (this example is presented in full in chapter 4).

The various shades of meaning within this complex can be seen in *Voluspá* 22, for example, where we read of the *volva* uttering *vel spá*, 'pleasing fortunes', and similarly Dronke (1997: 132) also records *forspár*, 'foreseeing the future', and *sannspár*, 'prophesying what proves to be true'.

The standard pattern of questions and answers, and also an audience, is corroborated by the enigmatic account of Ota's sorcery on the altar of Clonmacnoise in the different versions of the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, reviewed among the sources in the previous chapter. Despite undoubted Irish contacts with the Scandinavians, this text was composed utterly independently of the Nordic saga traditions (the Irish had their own), and the similarity between the performance in the *Cogadh* and the saga séances is therefore especially striking.

There are, however, some sources which differ. In the fourteenth-century Romance *Orvar-Odds saga* (2), for example, although the equipment for the divination ritual is prepared by the household in the usual way, the *volva* and her assistants perform the actual *seiðr* at night while everyone else is asleep. No details of the ritual are given, though the adjective *mikil* is used, a 'great' *seiðr*. The next morning the company assemble in the usual fashion, to hear their futures that have been revealed the night before. In this way the familiar pattern of question and answer is disturbed, and the audience are simply told what is in store for them. Interestingly, as each person comes before her, the *volva* begins her reply with the same formula, 'It's good to see you here, NN'. The context of the tale make it a highly unreliable source, but the deviations from the standard

pattern – the secret, nocturnal ritual and the absence of questions – are in no way vital to the plot.

We should perhaps also consider the audience of the *volva*'s prophecies. In accounts such as that in *Eiríks saga rauða* the seeress addresses the entire household, both collectively and individually. By contrast, in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Voluspá* 22, the *volur* seem to share their secrets only with women. In most of the saga examples, the *volva* addresses the audience in descending order of rank, beginning with the host who has invited her.

In all the accounts, there is a great emphasis on the observation of formalities. As we have seen above: the invitation, the hospitality in the form of a feast and sometimes more explicit payment, the preparation of materials and equipment, and the formal nature of the performance and its results. An interesting detail is added in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4, when Þorbiorg is asked to look over the farm and its livestock. The purpose of this is unstated, but the powerful gaze of sorcerers is mentioned several times in the sources and this may be a connected example (Raudvere 2001: 124).

McKinnell (2000, 2001: 398f) has noted a consistent antagonism between the *volur* and their male listeners in the sources, even extending to Óðinn. Again, these would seem to reflect the uneasy atmosphere of supernatural power and sexual ambivalence with which the *seiðr* rituals were surrounded. It is noticeable that few are comfortable in the *volur*'s presence.

Beyond the human world of practical knowledge about the immediate future of the *volva*'s listeners, we can also perceive a constant theme of divination and prophecy at a higher level, because it is to the *volur* (or their summoned spirits) that the gods themselves turn for advice.

The greatest example of this is, of course, *Voluspá* – the 'Prophecy of the *Volva*', in which the seeress is interrogated by Óðinn and lays out the doom of the gods. This poem is a field of scholarship in its own right, and there are many aspects of its 62 strophes that cannot be dealt with here. We can, however, isolate some characteristics of the divinations and the nature of the *volva*, in part •following Dronke's detailed analysis (1997: 25–153): her prophecy begins with a call for silence, and the invocation of a hallowed assembly is made; this •formalised theme of a speaker and audience continues throughout she stresses •that she speaks upon commission, in this case from Óðinn she establishes her authority to tell of the past and future, the 'sovereignty' of her mind; she speaks •as Óðinn's equal the antiquity of her memory goes back to the roots of the

World Tree itself, and she emphasises the physical framework of her vision which encompasses the nine levels of the underworld and *iarðar þrom*, ‘the edge of the earth’; her knowledge of the time to come derives from the prescience of •the dead with whom she has conversed though born of giants – which does not necessarily make her a giantess in the Norse scheme of things – the *volva*’s own nature is left unclear, disembodied and “without physical image” (Dronke 1997: 31); it is not even specified whether she is alive or dead, though the latter is •perhaps implied the *volva* is calm, precise, pragmatic and detached in her relations of the coming Ragnarok, “until the growing horror of events disturbs •even her composure” (*ibid*) her prophecy stresses the ordered nature of events, •and the actions of fate over the immense spans of time that she describes several times the *volva* asks if the audience still wants to hear more; it is clear •that her prophecy is not achieved without effort the audience, including in this •case Óðinn himself, is never allowed to speak or interrupt her as discussed above, the *volva* gains news of the distant past from a ‘second’ *volva*, perhaps from the world of the dead; the prophecy is thus a dialogue between the seeress •and a spirit, avaricious in character, who may be another aspect of herself she also relates a story of a third *volva*, performing for humans rather than gods The end of *Voluspá* is especially telling, and emphasises not only how the divinatory knowledge is obtained but also strengthens the interpretation of the third-person *volva* as a helping spirit aspect of the narrator: *Nu mun hón søkkvaz*, ‘Now she will sink’ (strophe 62: 8). The ritual ends when the spirit that has provided information decides that it no longer wishes to continue. Outside the strict Eddic corpus, similar rituals are found in *Baldrs draumar*, in which Óðinn wakes a dead *volva* at the gates of Hel to enquire about the life of his son.

The internal dialogue in *Voluspá* between the *volva* and her spirit counterpart also contains an account of a second ritual of divination:

Ein sat hón úti	Alone she sat out in the night,
þá er inn aldni kom,	when the old one came,
Yggiungr ása,	Æsir’s Son of Dread,
ok í augo leit:	and looked into her eyes:
‘Hvers fregnið mik?	‘What do you ask me?
Hví freistið mín?	Why do you try me?

Voluspá 28: 1–6; translation after Dronke 1997: 14

She emphasises how much of his own nature is revealed to her, and he pays for her prophecy with rings and necklaces (strophe 29, quoted above).

We have seen above how the *volur* seem to have been expected to produce generally favourable divinations. Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 80) argues that this was linked to the idea that they not only foretold the future, but actually shaped it. This is made very explicit in *Nornagests þáttr*, where the three *volur* are actually called *nornir* as well, but this is most likely a later distortion. However, if Reichborn-Kjennerud was right and this *was* a general perception in the Viking Age too, then this may explain the violent reaction of men who received an unwelcome prophecy about themselves. In this case the *volur* would not just be the bearers of bad news, but also its engineers. This contradicts one of the arguments made against a shamanic interpretation of *seiðr* (Ohlmarks 1939: 319–26; Słupecki 1998: 203), that in its oracular form it was not used to gain control of the events predicted but merely to foresee them.

Another common theme in the saga accounts is the employment of sorcerers as clairvoyants, to see things happening far off and to reveal the whereabouts of hidden objects or people.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka* (1–2), King Fróði employs a range of sorcerers of both sexes to reveal the hiding place of the boys who threaten his usurpation of the Danish throne, as discussed above. What is interesting here is not only the detail of their magical search methods, but the clear ranking of skill and speciality which makes Fróði enlist different types of sorcerer in turn.

Þä lætur hann sækia voluur og vijsinda menn vmm allt landid, og lætur þä kanna landid vpp og ofan, eyar og vtskier, og finnast þeir eÿ. Og nu lætur hann sækia galldra menn sem eptir ollu gieta rijnt, þui sem þeir vilia, en þeir seigia honum ad eij muni þeir áá landi fæddir, enn þo muni þeir eij fiærri konginum.

Then he [Fróði] sought out *volur* and *vísendamenn* in all the land, and had them search the country up and down, even the islands and skerries, and they found nothing. And then he sought out *galdramenn* who could pry into anything they wished, and who told him that they [the boys] were not being brought up on land, but that they were not far from the king.

Hrólfs saga kraka 1; text after Slay's edition, translation after Byock (1998: 2) with my amendments

The *galdramenn* point out that there is one island (where the boys are in fact hiding) which is difficult for them to see, as it is shrouded in *mikil þoka og hulda*, 'a great mist and veiling', especially around the house of the boys' protector. The saga has earlier mentioned that this man, Vífill, is skilled in the arts of old magic, 'especially when threatened'. The suggestion that some kind of cloaking counter-

spell is at work to keep the boys hidden is reinforced when we learn in the next chapter that Vífill is aware of the *galdramenn*'s search:
Þad var einn morgun snemma ad kallinn Vijfill vaknar og m(ælir), margt er kinligt áá ferd og flugi, og miklar fylgiur og mättugar eru hingad komnar j eina.

Early one morning Vífill awoke suddenly, crying out, 'The air and the paths are alive with magic, and great and powerful *fylgjur* have visited the island'.

Hrólfs saga kraka 2; text after Slay's edition, translation after Byock (1998:3) with my amendments

The phrase *margt er kinligt áá ferd og flugi* is difficult to translate, but I have preferred Byock's version here because it accurately conveys the sense of the original, which implies both an atmosphere of supernatural unease and the turbulence caused by something's passing. This is a clear link to the helping spirits discussed above, and it is interesting that Vífill has apparently perceived them in his sleep, a familiar pattern. We should also note the difference in sorcerous penetration of areas of sea, land, and islands. The latter seem to be perceived as something intermediate, and this perhaps echoes the significance of Samsø as a kind of place between the worlds, where Óðinn practises *seiðr* in *Lokasenna*, and Hervor walks through the burial fires in the poem known as 'The Waking of Angantyr'.

Hunting and weather magic

This interaction of sorcery and nature is also seen in the use of *seiðr* to affect the weather and the movements of game and fish.

In *Landnámabók* (194), for example, Þuríðr sundafyllir employs *seiðr* to stock a fjord with fish, thereby living up to her nickname, 'sound-filler'. On occasion *seiðr*-workers could also deprive an area of its resources, as in the thirteenth-century *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (1) which describes a period of hard times in Hålogaland. A fjord which has previously teemed with fish is suddenly emptied of life, at the same time as several fishermen are attacked by two troll-women. The sorceresses exchange insults with the men, and speak a verse in Eddic style that explains their actions:
Þat var fyrri at faðir okkarr burtu seiddi báru hjarðir; It happened before that our father *seiðed* away the herds of the waves [fish]; Kleima's verse from *Gríms saga loðinkinna*; text after Skjaldedigtning BII: 309, my translation

In chapter 2 we referred briefly to the post-medieval sources that also contain occasional references to *seiðr* in the context of folklore, and it is interesting that several of these episodes also concern the use of this magic to attract fish, and in connection with food preparation (Almqvist 2000: 261ff).

In discussions of the *seiðr* episode from *Eiríks saga rauða* (4), it has often been overlooked that in addition to her divination of personal fate the *volva* Þorbiorg also predicts the weather, saying that the run of bad times will shortly come to an end. In the medieval fable *Orvar-Odds saga* (2), the *volva* Heiðr similarly supplements her individual predictions by foretelling the weather for the coming year.

Weather magic could also be used as a form of attack. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (17–19), a man called Þórstein has been bested in a feud, and runs home to his mother Auðbiorg, who is a sorceress. She wakes in the night, feeling restless and fidgety, and goes outside. She walks several times anti-clockwise around the house, sniffing all the time with her nostrils lifted, and though the sky is at first clear and cloudless a storm soon gathers. The hard weather unleashes itself against the mountainside and starts an avalanche which falls onto the home of Þórstein's foe, killing twelve men. A similar pattern is found in *Laxdæla saga* (35), when the *seiðmenn* Kotkell and his sons conjure a storm at sea through a combination of *seiðr* and *galdr*, bringing about the shipwreck death of their enemies. In *Gongu-Hrólfs saga* (28), twelve *seiðmenn* send a magical wind against an armed force in camp, whose tents have been strengthened by their own sorcerer against such an eventual attack. While in the tents the men are safe, but anyone who looks outside his tent is first driven mad and then subsequently dies.

In a similar episode from the later sagas, in *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* the two *seiðkonur* Heiðr and Hamgláma try to destroy Friðþjóf's ship with a storm that they summon through *seiðr* and *galdr*. Shape-changing also plays a part in this (as Hamgláma's name implies), as their *hamingjur* attempt to break the vessel in the form of whales on which the women ride.

The role of the healer

The role of magical healers, especially women, also seems to have been important in the Viking Age. The activities of these people were played out beyond the specific realm of 'magic' and more often find an expression through 'wise women' and similar figures (see Mundal & Steinsland 1989; DuBois 1999: ch. 5). Indeed, popular healers of this kind are still found today, and were

certainly a common – if somewhat secretive – aspect of rural life in Scandinavia long into the nineteenth century.

Healing through sorcery is listed among Óðinn's skills in the prologue to *Gongu-Hrólfs saga*, and we have seen this in more detail earlier in this chapter. In the written sources *seiðr* is also occasionally used by human sorcerers to heal specific illnesses, but often this is depicted as the corollary of first inflicting them upon someone and then curing them. In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (25), for example, leprosy is conferred and removed in this way. It may be significant that these instances seem to focus on diseases which affect the physical appearance of the sufferer, which could link to the concept of transformation and image that is otherwise so central in the shape-shifting aspect of sorcery. Indeed, in *Sturlaugs saga* the man in question actually asks a *seiðmaðr* to give him leprosy, so that through his affliction he may arouse the compassion of a woman otherwise resistant to his advances (a rather drastic form of courtship, one might think).

In general, however, *seiðr* seems to have been used very little for healing, beyond its employment by Óðinn. A few exceptions in a battlefield context will be discussed in chapter 6.

There are several mentions in the sagas of runes being used for curing purposes (*e.g. Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 72), and some explicit references in the Eddic poetry, of which the most developed can be found in *Hávamál* and here in *Sigrdrífomál*:

Biargrúnar skaltu nema,
ok leysa kind frá konom;
á lófa þær skal rísta
ok biðia þá dísir duga.

ef þú biarga vilt

ok of liðo spenna

Limrúnar skaltu kunna,
ok kunna sár at sía;
á berki skal þær rísta
þess er lúti austr limar.

ef þú vilt læknir vera,

ok á bari viðar,

Helping-runes you must know if you want to assist and release children from women; they shall be cut on the palms and clasped on the joints, and then the *dísir* asked for help.

Limb-runes you must know if you want to be a healer and know how to see to wounds; on bark they must be cut and of the tree of the wood, on those whose branches bend east.

Sigrdrífomál 9, 11; translation after Larrington 1996: 168

The evidence for runic healing charms has been briefly summarised by Raudvere (2001: 142–6). In the material culture we find similar phenomena, in runic inscriptions such as that on the Hemdrup staff.

Seiðr contextualised

With the exception of divination, *all* of these functions listed above within *seiðr*'s 'domestic' environment play a very minor role in the written descriptions, which is why comparatively little space has been devoted to them here. Before going on to explore the mechanics of the aggressive sorcery that appears so often in the poetry and sagas, we first need to understand why the structure of Norse magic appears to have been built up in this way. This requires a comparative framework within which *seiðr* and its analogues can be placed.

Since the very earliest studies of *seiðr* and 'Óðinnic sorcery', there has been one trend above all others which has tended to dominate the discussion. Already touched on several times above, this is the interpretation of *seiðr* in the context of what anthropologists have sometimes called 'shamanism'. In practice, this question has most often taken the form of analogies drawn between these aspects of Old Norse belief and what have been seen as comparable features in the 'shamanic' religion of the Sámi – a discussion often framed, somewhat problematically, in terms of influences from one culture to the other. The next chapter critically reviews these aspects of Sámi ritual practice, and expands the discussion of *seiðr* across the ethnic boundaries of the early medieval Scandinavian population. By extending this debate from a Germanic cultural context to a circumpolar one, the stage is thereby set for the broader discussion of a possible Old Norse shamanism that will be taken up in chapter 5. In chapters 6 and 7 this will be followed by a concluding analysis of what I argue to have been *seiðr*'s primary role in the Norse world-view.

4

Noaidevuohta

Drífa keypti at Hulð seiðkonu, at hon skyldi siða Vanlanda til Finnlands eða deyða hann at oðrum kosti. En er seiðr var framiðr, var Vanlandi at Uppsolum. Þá gerði hann fúsan at fara til Finnlands, en vinir hans ok ráðamenn bonnuðu honum ok sogðu, at vera myndi fjolkynngi Finna í fýsi hans.

Drífa hired a seiðkona *called Hulð to work* seiðr *so as to bring Vanlandi back to Finnland or else to kill him. When the* seiðr *took effect, Vanlandi was at Uppsala. Then he felt a strong desire to go to Finnland, but his friends and advisors forbade it, and said that there must be some sorcery of the Finns in his desire.*

Ynglingasaga 13; my translation

Seiðr and the Sámi

The identification of *seiðr* and other Óðinnic rituals with what were perceived as similar practices among the Sámi has very long antecedents in Northern studies. Indeed, the first such comparison appears in Fritzner's work from 1877, which as we have seen was also one of the first to discuss *seiðr* in specific terms. This paper in many ways set the pattern for much subsequent comparative research, in that Fritzner seems only to have considered a transfer of ideas from the Norse to the Sámi, never in the opposite direction.

Two scholars of Sámi religion have charted this process, Håkan Rydving (1990) and Åke Hultkrantz (2001), and I have been reliant on both these works in the brief summary that I provide here.

Rydving (1990: 359f) notes that the idea of Norse loans in the Sámi religion was current even at the time of the eighteenth-century missions, being found for example in the writings of priests such as Hans Skanke. For the most part, however, prior to the late 1800s Sámi religion was considered very

vaguely in systemic terms (Hultkrantz 2001: 413). As Fritzner's ideas on the Norse origins of Sámi mythology began to be taken up, even the very purpose of studying Sámi religion was subordinated to this notion. The primary value of such research was thus to examine aspects of Norse beliefs that had been preserved in borrowed form after they had 'disappeared' among the Scandinavians. The main argument instead focused on the date of the original Nordic beliefs that the Sámi had supposedly taken over, the discussion swinging from the Bronze Age to the Viking period, and even into the late Middle Ages when it was thought that Christian Scandinavians may have passed on their unwanted pagan customs (see, for example, Olrik 1905; Krohn 1906; Holmberg [Harva] 1915).

The idea of Sámi religious borrowing was also adopted as an adjunct to Dumézil's argument for a three-fold division of the Norse (and Indo-European) divinities, while a related discussion that had begun in the early twentieth century sought similarities between the supposed Norse 'trinity' of Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr and what were argued to be the equivalent Sámi gods (Hultkrantz 2001: 417f).

The thunder-god was particularly important in this respect. A frequent recipient of sacrifices, this deity had different names in different parts of Sápmi, but there is no doubt that one of these really is some kind of loan: in the North Sámi dialect he is called Horagállis, the first element of which is related to the name of the Norse god Þórr (numerous scholars pursued this line, *e.g.* Fritzner 1877; Krohn 1906; Holmberg [Harva] 1987 [1915] and de Vries 1957; for a full review, see Rydving 1993b: 46).

Other comparisons included Varaldenolmmái, the Sámi fertility god, who was equated with Freyr (Olrik 1905: 51 and references in Rydving 1990: 361). The wind god Bieggolmmái was similarly compared with Njorðr (*ibid*), and Rota the ruler of the underworld was associated with Óðinn (von Unwerth 1914; Olrik & Ellekilde 1926–51: 124). The Sámi mother goddesses, discussed below, have been claimed as versions of the *nornir* and Scandinavian female deities, in work again summarised by Rydving (1990: 363f).

Seiðr itself came in for special study here, with a number of researchers arguing that this was the origin of the Sámi *noaidevuohta*, the collective name for the 'shamanic' spiritual practices that we shall examine in this chapter. The

divinatory aspects of *seiðr* were taken to be the inspiration for the use of the Sámi drum for a similar purpose (Krohn 1906: 158; Olrik & Ellekilde 1926–51: 107), and even the drum symbols themselves were speculated to have had a Norse origin (Reuterskiöld 1928: 121, though he acknowledged Sámi religion as a separate entity).

Other writers took the opposite approach. The central thesis of Strömbäck's book on *seiðr* was that this form of sorcery was not only shamanic in nature, but a loan *from* the Sámi (1935: 196–206). This can be seen as a clear benchmark in the changing perceptions of spiritual relationships between the two cultures, reversing Fritzner's theory on the Sámi as recipients of Norse ideas.

John Lindow (2000) has broadly followed Strömbäck's ideas, but at a greater remove, suggesting that the description of Óðinn's powers in *Ynglingasaga* (7) is based on the attributes of Sámi *noaidi*, 'shamans', from Snorri's own time. He argues that the concept of *seiðr* as outlined there should not be taken as reflecting very much of the Nordic belief system of the Viking Age. It is certainly possible, even likely, that Snorri knew of the Sámi religion, but Lindow's argument is hard to accept in that there are so many elements of Óðinn's skills that are definitely not found among the Sámi (the concept of *ergi* especially). What is important in the present context, however, is that Lindow accepts the essentially shamanic nature of the *Ynglingasaga* passage. He links this to Snorri's idea of a human Óðinn with origins in Asia, what we now know to be the 'cradle' of shamanism. I cannot follow this reasoning, again, because this connection is not one which could have been made before the sixteenth century at the very earliest, as we shall see in chapter 5. However, to this Lindow adds an intriguing suggestion that Snorri may have believed that Óðinn lay behind not only Norse sorcery, but that of the Sámi as well.

All these perspectives have several problems in common, which Rydving has summarised thus:

[…] analogies were often sought without critical questions being asked about *how* the elements had been taken over, why certain elements were borrowed, and others not etc. Methodologically, the theory was treacherous, since similarities could always be explained as loans, and dissimilarities either as

examples of beliefs and practices older than the literary Scandinavian sources, or, as more recent borrowed folk customs.

Rydving 1990: 365

The idea that Sámi belief was an independent indigenous development within the larger sphere of circumpolar spirituality, especially shamanism, came astonishingly late. Edgar Reuterskiöld (1912) and K. B. Wiklund (1916) were among the first, the latter with his tentative suggestion that some of the Sámi underground beings could not be paralleled at all in the Scandinavian material, and might therefore be something quite separate. By the 1920s, Björn Collinder (1926: 30) was beginning to shift both the Sámi and the Norse into a broader Eurasian perspective, drawing both cultures into the circumpolar sphere. The idea of the self-contained nature of Sámi religion has since been reiterated many times (*e.g.* Karsten 1955; Pettersson 1957; Bäckman 1975; Mebius 1968), and even aspects of the earlier debate have been reoriented in this new context (for example by Ränk, 1981, who extends the Óðinn-Rota complex into a Eurasian arena).

If *noaidevuohta* formed a distinct branch within a larger pattern of Northern religion, it nevertheless took some considerable time before the suggestion was made that *seiðr* too was part of a similarly independent but related scheme of belief. This idea was implicit in much of the work on *seiðr* that we have reviewed in chapter 2, but it was first put forward explicitly by Hultkrantz (1979a: 55), and the point was made again by Lotte Motz in 1983.

This is the line that I have myself taken in earlier articles (*e.g.* Price 1998b, 2000b & c, 2004a), and the one that will be pursued here. This is not to say that we shall not be looking at Sámi religion in search of parallels for the *seiðr* complex – that is the purpose of this chapter. The important point here is that these comparisons are not made in the context of ideas ‘taken over’ from one ethnic group to the other, in an argument varying only as to the direction of travel.

In making such analogies, we firstly have to once again guard against the notion of homogeneity in both the Norse and Sámi beliefs, and acknowledge the regional and chronological variations involved. With this nuance established, it is clear that if two broadly similar complexes of beliefs co-exist in the same geographical area, maintained by two cultures living in relative

harmony, then there will inevitably be some kind of exchange of concepts. Rather than looking at the influence of one culture by the other, we can instead focus on conceptual similarities and separate development within a common tradition. From studies of spirituality among the Sámi we cannot say that the same phenomena must have occurred in Norse beliefs, or *vice versa*. However, we *can* test what we already know about *seiðr* against the Sámi material, to see if the conclusions that we have drawn from the Norse written sources seem reasonable in the light of other circumpolar belief systems. An examination of sorcery among their nearest neighbours therefore provides us with the best framework for the interpretation of the Vikings' magical practices.

Sámi-Norse relations in the Viking Age

In considering the ethnic patterns of religious belief among the inhabitants of Scandinavia, we first have to consider the nature of the relationship between the Sámi and Nordic peoples. Much has been published on this subject over the last two decades, and only an orientation to the main arguments will be given here.

Until relatively recently, a consistent problem in the understanding of population interaction in Viking-Age Scandinavia has been an unwritten assumption that the Sámi did not play an important role in the structure of late Iron Age society as a whole. This is, of course, a controversial assertion, but attention has been drawn to this on several previous occasions, in far greater depth than I am able to go into here (*e.g.* Schanche & Olsen 1985; Olsen 1986 & 1998; Zachrisson 1991a, 1994a & b; Aikio 2006; Yamamoto 2010). By way of evaluation, it is worth considering that in most of our synthetic models of the Viking Age the Sámi are either not mentioned at all, or else confined to a few pages concerned solely with a people of exotic arctic snowscapes. This problem is fundamental for any study of Viking-Age cultural interaction and identity.

The best starting-point is probably geography, because any discussion of cultural contact must necessarily proceed from at least an approximate understanding of population distribution. In the Viking Age this is far from simple. Figure 4.1 shows the modern distribution of the Sámi in Scandinavia, although perhaps we should rather say that it maps the distribution of active

Sámi cultural awareness, since we have to bear in mind that, for example, the largest concentration of Sámi in Sweden is in Stockholm. This kind of image and the assumptions behind it informs almost every major publication on the Viking Age – essentially depicting the Sámi as a people inhabiting a far northern periphery, with tenuous contacts to the Viking homelands in the south expressed through periodic taxation, the raising of tribute, and a trade in furs. Sometimes the issue is evaded completely by just printing maps of 'settled areas' (*i.e.* the agricultural heartlands of south-central Scandinavia and along the western Norwegian coast) or sometimes their opposite, 'areas without settlement', both of these raising the obvious question as to exactly what kind of settlement is under discussion.

For the Viking Age, we cannot simply apply modern population geographies to an ancient ethnic map. The truth of this is confirmed by a substantial body of work carried out over the last twenty years (*e.g.* Zachrisson 1997; Dunfjeld-Aagård 2005; Bergman *et al.* 2007; Bruun 2007; Bergstøl 2008a & b; Ojala 2009; Broadbent 2010; Gjerde 2012), in particular the collation and synthesis of evidence for Sámi remains south of the traditional cultural border.

In this context we can firstly consider the belt of cremation cemeteries, distributed across Sweden from middle Norrland as far south as northern Svealand, usually known as 'inland lake graves' (Sw. *insjögravar*). The meaning of these burials, found either in small clusters or occasionally as single mounds, has long been debated, especially in a cultural context (cf. Hallström 1931; Serning 1962 & 1966; Hyenstrand 1974 & 1987). Located primarily in the forests, especially around the shores of the numerous small inland lakes – hence their name – it has been suggested that the graves represent individuals from marginal farming societies (Baudou 1977 & 1978, with a modified position 1988). An alternative viewpoint sees them as the burials of a mobile hunting culture, quite distinct from the permanent agrarian settlements of the plains (Selinge 1976, 1979, 1994); the latter view has also been echoed in Norway (Skjølsvold 1969, 1980). These arguments are complex, and the numerous contributions to the discussion have been ably summarised at greater length elsewhere (Zachrisson 1997: 33–40), but the debate has most often focused on the possibility that the apparent farming-

hunting division in the grave distributions may have ethnic overtones, that is to say that it represents aspects of a Nordic-Sámi population pattern.

This is problematic on several levels. On the one hand there is little to distinguish the graves in an individual sense from the burials of the agrarian lowlands, as they exhibit much the same range of monumental types and constructions, and differ mostly in their distribution and landscape setting (cf. Lekberg 1990, who argues that the term is essentially without meaning, at least for northern Dalarna). In addition, it is clear that we should avoid the simplistic assumption that Sámi communities were always composed of hunters and pastoralists while the Nordic population were exclusively sedentary farmers. While it seems clear that the *insjögravar* do represent the burials of relatively mobile hunters living in a marginal environment, this may reflect lifestyle and economic strategy rather than ethnicity (though the latter may of course be formed by just such a reflection).

However, while we must be careful to qualify our judgements and allow variable pluralities of meaning in the *insjögravar*, there are a number of compelling factors which suggest that many of them do indeed represent the burials of Sámi. Even in the early Iron Age and Roman period, *insjögravar* at sites such as Krankmårtenshög in Härjedalen's Storsjö include stone-set mounds covered with crowns of reindeer antler – a custom completely unknown on agrarian sites even in areas where reindeer are common, setting graves like this apart not just in location but also in character (cf. Ambrosiani *et al.* 1984; Olofsson 2010). Many finds from *insjögravar* right across their distribution area are also familiar from Sámi contexts elsewhere, and are equally unknown in the agrarian settlements of the southern lowlands. Objects of this kind include skin scrapers of a form found right across the sub-arctic regions of Eurasia, and pieces decorated in art styles characteristic of artefacts which unequivocally belong to the Sámi culture, such as shamanic drums. These items include sword hilts, weaving combs and even sculpted figurines such as a small bird found at Hästnäset in Dalarna; these and many other examples are again covered in detail by Zachrisson (1997: 189–220).

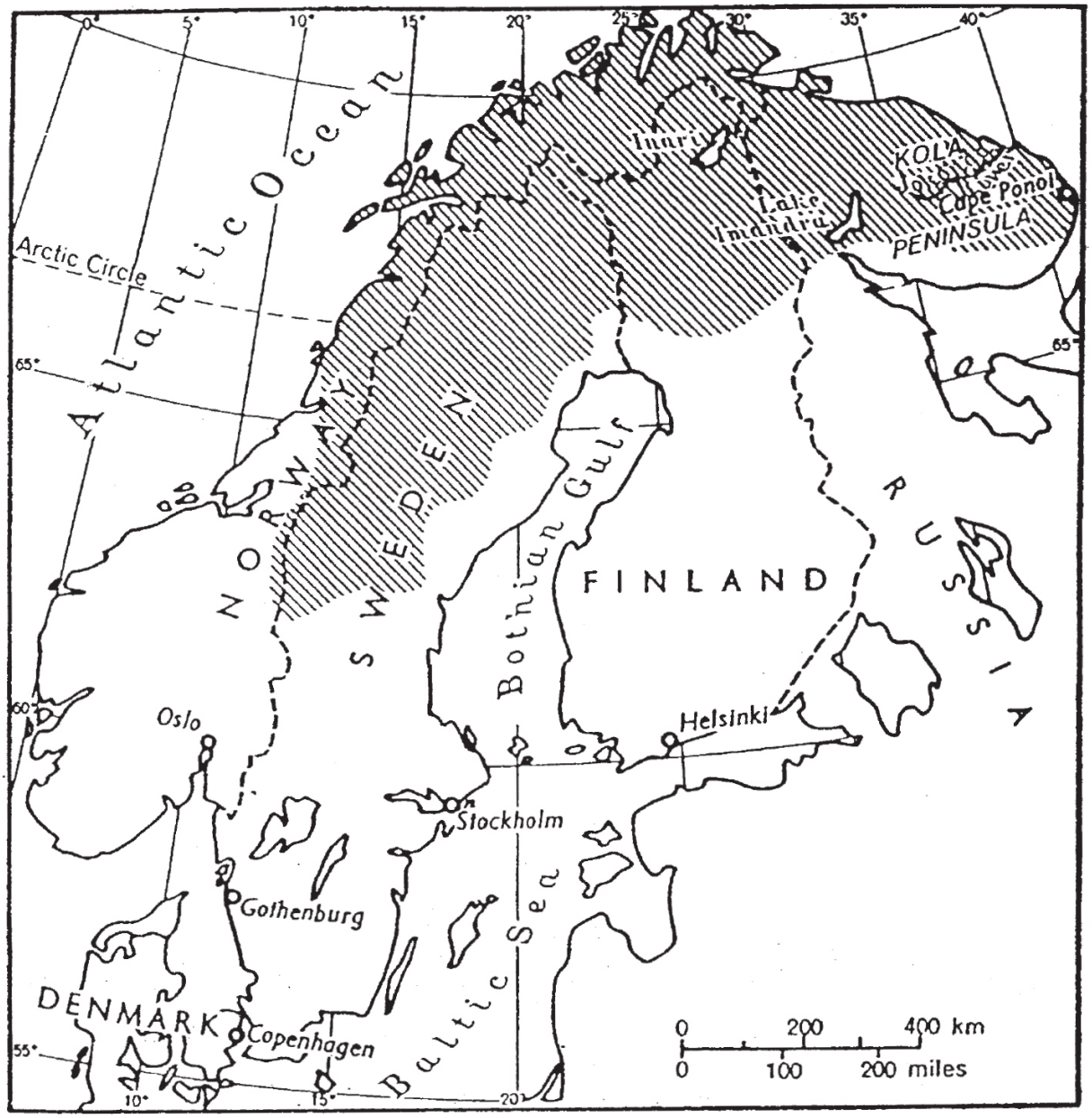


Fig. 4.1 The modern distribution of Sámi culture (after Collinder 1949; Zachrisson 1994a).

In addition to the inland lake graves, there are also indications of settlements in the form of semi-permanent encampment sites, consisting of stone tent rings and hearths from circular *kåta* dwellings. Groups of these have been found at the southern Norwegian sites of Grøv Seter (Helmen 1949), Hallingdal and Hol (Zachrisson 1997: 194; Lindblom 1994), in Jämtland at Vivallen (Zachrisson 1997: 117–24) and on the eastern Swedish coast at

Hornslandet in Hälsingland (Westberg 1964; see also Zachrisson 1997: 192ff). This picture of a southern forest culture is also strengthened by written accounts of Sámi settlement in central Scandinavia long into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Erik Dahlberg's famous illustrated survey of Sweden, *Suecia antiqua*, even includes engravings of Sámi, with reindeer, in southern Dalarna (Dahlberg 1667–1715, II:45).

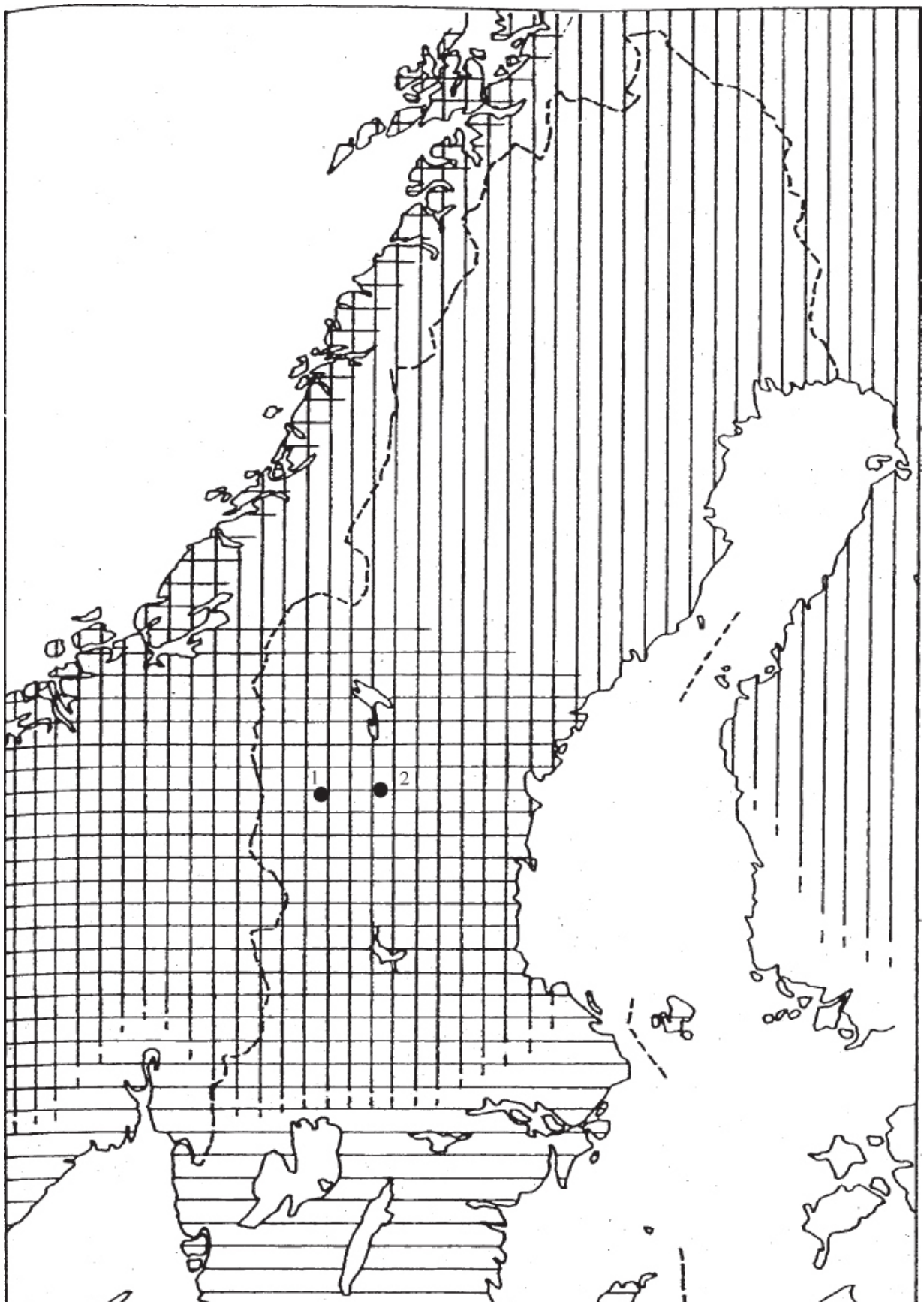
Evidence for Sámi activity and contact is also found even further south, in the great ship burial cemeteries of Vendel and Valsgärde, both in the Swedish province of Uppland, where we find artefacts of Sámi manufacture used in ways that suggest more than simple trade. The most dramatic are a number of fragments of birch bark, sewn with sinew-thread and decorated with geometric designs painted or burnt onto the bark. The patterns are typical of Sámi styles found on bark shrouds from graves in the Norwegian Varangerfjord region (cf. Solberg 1909: 112; Kleppe 1977), and the examples from the Uppland ship burials may once have formed part of the flexible walls of *kåta* tents (Arwidsson 1942: 106–9). The sheets of bark were found in Vendel graves 7 and 12 (Stolpe & Arne 1912: 32, 45), and Valsgärde graves 6 and 8 (Arwidsson 1942: 106–9; 1954: 107–12), all from the seventh to ninth centuries. In every case, the bark was draped in several layers over or under the burial deposits in the ships, in a fashion reminiscent of the Sámi burial rite of wrapping the dead in birch bark shrouds (Zachrisson 1997: 194f).

The implications of this are difficult to assess, but similar issues have been raised in work at the Archaeological Research Laboratory at the University of Stockholm, analysing human remains from more Uppland ship burials at Tuna in Alsike (Lidén *et al.* 2001). DNA analyses seem to tentatively suggest that at least one of the individuals buried in these vessels – in grave 6a – may have had partly Sámi ancestry. Clearly caution is warranted here, not least because it would surely be surprising if there was *not* a reasonably high level of physical interaction between Sámi and Norse, but mostly because we should be very careful in attaching ethnic (as opposed to genetic) identity to strands of DNA. Even more interesting are the nutritional studies of bodies from the same ship burial field, which have located very high levels of selenium in some of the men (Lidén & Nelson 1994). In Scandinavia, this is consistent only with a diet in which reindeer is predominant, and we must bear in mind that the Tuna cemetery lies well to the south-west of Uppsala, in an area far

from the natural range of these animals. Moreover, it is interesting that only some of the men have this diet, not all of them, especially considering that all the graves seem to be of similarly high status. It does not therefore seem to relate to the diet of the community as a whole or even of one social class within it. Obviously, eating reindeer does not make someone a Sámi, but the suggestion is tempting in this context. If we consider the artefacts in the graves, the reindeer diet and even the DNA, it is *possible* that individuals with an ethnic Sámi identity were the primary occupants of some of the Uppland ship burials, an idea with intriguing potential.

When all this material is taken together – the broad distribution of the inland lake graves (albeit with their ethnic qualifications), the excavated sites of *kåta* encampments, the southerly finds of objects decorated in Sámi styles, and the evidence of the ship burials – a general picture begins to emerge, though not without its nuances and complications. Using this data, Inger Zachrisson and her colleagues have mapped out a new distribution for the Sámi during the Viking Age, a patterning that has wide-ranging implications as it suggests the existence of a broad zone across lowland Sweden and Norway – stretching approximately from Jämtland in the north to Uppland in the south – in which the Sámi and Nordic populations co-existed (Fig. 4.2). This is clearly controversial, as Zachrisson is the first to admit, but only up to point. Even if the southernmost material is the result solely of trading and exchange, nevertheless the *unequivocal* indications of Sámi presence lie only a few tens of kilometres to the north. One way or another, we have good •grounds for suggesting the following: that in the Viking Age the mobile range of Sámi nomadic populations extended far south of their modern •borders that there was a well-developed network of Sámi trade and trading presence among the Germanic chieftaincies in south central Sweden and •Norway that this presence may have taken the form of active Sámi integration at high levels of Germanic society (and perhaps at other social •strata too) And most important of all, that very large areas of what we have come to think of as ‘Viking’ Scandinavia, far south of Lappland, in fact supported two ethnically-distinct population groups, broadly equating to ‘Sámi’ and ‘Germanic’ identities. These groups seem to have lived essentially side-by-side, sometimes in literally adjacent communities, with little sign of friction between them.

This picture may be what lies behind the rather garbled information recorded by Adam of Bremen (IV: 25, 32), who describes periodic contacts at a high social level between the Swedes and people who appear to have been Sámis. Several scholars from other disciplines have supported this in different ways, such as Régis Boyer in his work on Nordic magic. Here he argued, rather exaggeratedly perhaps, that the Sámi population distribution once extended throughout the whole of the Scandinavian peninsula, and that their practices were inevitably influential in the development of *seiðr* (Boyer 1986: 57–71).


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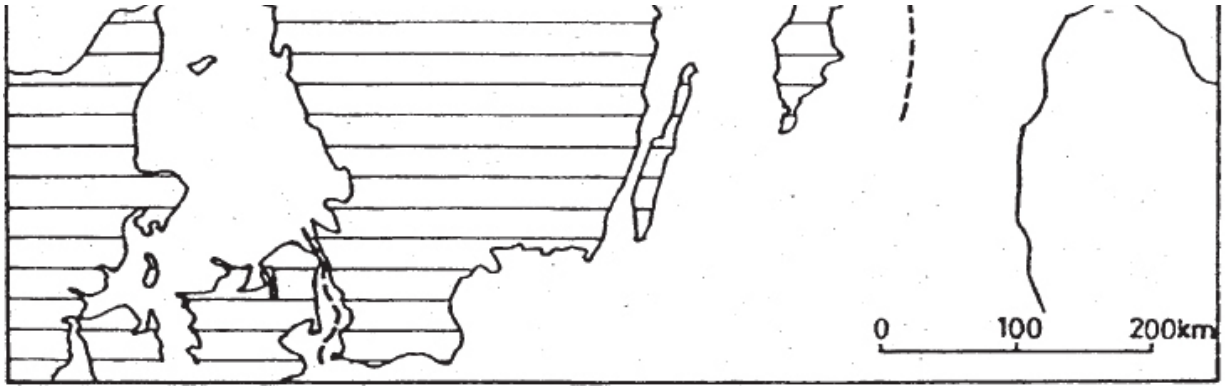


Fig. 4.2 The suggested cultural distribution of the Sámi (vertical lines) and Nordic (horizontal lines) peoples in the Viking Age. The sites mentioned in the text are marked: 1. Vivallen, 2. Överhogdal (after Zachrisson 1997: 219).

We must remember too that all this is looking only at the crudest levels of ethnic identity, let alone at all the additional forms of social distinction that must have been operating concurrently (cf. Price 1998a). Reviewing this material, much has been made of the difficulty in determining whether or not these remains are 'Sámi' in origin, and of course this kind of problem is integral to every archaeological discussion of ethnicity. I have discussed this at length elsewhere (Price 1994c, 1995a, 1998a) as have scholars cited above such as Olsen, Schanche and Zachrisson, so I will not dwell on this debate here, but it is worth reiterating that these questions are *only* asked when it is a matter of Sámi ethnicity – it is never queried whether Gamla Uppsala is a 'Swedish' site, or whether the Oseberg ship burial is 'Norwegian' and so on (cf. Hætta 1995). In the specific case of the material discussed above, their clear differences in relation to Viking material culture, and their equally clear links with artefactual traditions in the northern Sámi cultural area, then we should perhaps consider that the use of 'Sámi' as a cultural term has been avoided for far too long (see also Zachrisson's 1994a discussion of this theme).

Clearly, the creation of a Viking Age in which the Sámi are not accorded their due prominence, influence and expanded population distribution, is unjust to the Sámi people today, who are thus deprived of their heritage. However, it is *also* a misrepresentation of the Nordic people's history, because a Sámi-less Viking Age distorts their past too.

One of the most obvious conclusions to draw from this is that we must start to re-evaluate exactly what we mean by terms like ‘Sámi’ and ‘Norse’ in these contexts. Not least, there are of course considerable regional differences in the different groups of the Sámi people, following different economic strategies and different social trajectories, but it is also true to say that all the Viking-Age Sámi of Fenno-Scandia formed part of an overarching circumpolar culture – and it is with this culture, and its intimate contacts with the Nordic population, that Viking scholars must engage if we are to have any hope of creating rational models for the early medieval period in the European north.

To do this in a spiritual context, it is first necessary to gain an outline understanding of the Sámi belief system in general, unfamiliar as it may be by comparison with the better-known pre-Christian religion of the Norse.

Sámi religion and the Drum-Time

The conversion of Scandinavia in the late Viking period essentially started and finished with the Nordic population. A few Sámi people were caught up in this process along the northern Norwegian coast, but the incidental nature of these contacts with Christianity was typical for the religious encounter long into the Middle Ages. Certainly there were aspects of the alien faith that took root among the Sámi, with an abortive attempt at a mission in the late fourteenth century, and elements of Catholic iconography and nomenclature transformed and incorporated into their traditional religious culture. Notwithstanding these efforts, however, by the Reformation the traditional system of animist belief still provided the fundamental core of Sámi life and community.

Given the predominant polarisation of Europe between two branches of the Christian faith, it was therefore inevitable that curious rumours would spread about this pagan people in the far north, unheard of in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the Thirty Years’ War of 1618–48, when Sweden won a string of victories and began to forge a north European empire, it was perhaps not then surprising that the country’s remarkable success was attributed abroad to witchcraft. The idea grew that the Swedes must have had sorcerous help from these strange ‘wizards’ of Lappland.

It is to this rumour – or rather the Swedish monarchy’s objection to it – that we owe the first careful record of the traditional religion of the Sámi.

Piecemeal attempts at church-building and conversion had been underway in the far north since the early 1600s, but these had been more concerned with opposing the Russian presence in the Barents Sea than with saving local souls, and these missions had not met with much success. The embarrassing talk of godless sorcery continued to persist in the decades after the peace treaty, and clearly a concerted scientific effort was required to dispel such slander. In the early 1670s, this resulted in a royal commision given to an Uppsala scholar called Johannes Schefferus, tasked with making a proper report on the truth of the matter. His work built on several other relations and notes compiled by earlier priests, but the resulting book, *Lapponia*, was the first to collect all the material then available. Published in Latin in 1673 and rapidly translated into several European languages, it became the contemporary equivalent of a bestseller (a Swedish version oddly came much later). Although there are fragmented glimpses of Sámi religion in the Icelandic sagas and medieval works such as the *Historia Norvegiae*, it was Schefferus' book that gave a wider world its first detailed view of their beliefs. He described what we would later understand as the *noaidi* and the 'shamanic' séance, the apparent worship of stones and trees, the sacrifices to the gods on 'altars' of antler and wood, and the omnipresent realm of spirits.

Although Schefferus seemed to have believed that the Sámi had abandoned their traditional religion, by the 1680s it became clear that this was not the case. In order to stamp out this heresy, the first concerted missionary work began at this time in Swedish and Finnish Lappland. The mission was broken off after a few years due to the outbreak of the Great Northern War, but up to that time it had been pursued with less than fanatical zeal. Partly this was due to the spirit of Lutheran Orthodoxy which focused on ritual rather than faith, and partly also due to the fear that repressive measures would simply drive the Sámi to support the Swedes' enemies in Russia.

This changed at the cessation of hostilities in the early 1720s, when the main phase of the Christian missions began. These were prosecuted with particular fervour by Norwegian priests within the different doctrine of Pietism, which unlike the Lutheran faith focused on true conversion and a deep change of belief. Led by the Pietist Thomas von Westen, who emerges from the contemporary record as an especially ruthless man, the missions were spurred on by the discovery that many of the shamanic drums

confiscated by the churchmen in the 1680s were fakes, made by the Sámi to deceive these representatives of a foreign faith.

It is worth emphasising that some 70–80% of our *total* sources for Sámi religion emerged from this period of the Norwegian missions, and the bias that this has introduced into our understanding of traditional beliefs in Sápmi should not be underestimated. The priests of course brought their own prejudices with them, social as well as religious, and it is for this reason that the surviving records focus to an overwhelming degree on the male sphere of Sámi religion. The beliefs of women seem to have been generally regarded as uninteresting by the missionaries. In addition to this skewed gender representation, we should note that the churchmen concentrated their efforts within a relatively limited geographical area. In simple terms, today we have little choice but to extrapolate general Sámi spiritual beliefs from what is essentially a record of South Sámi male traditions in Trøndelag during the 1720s (cf. Rydving 2010 on the Western Sámi).

There are, of course, other sources. The majority of Swedish missionary records of Sámi traditional beliefs date from the 1740s and 50s, a period when greater religious tolerance was practised, and there is much to be gained from this material. To this may be added the trial protocols from the accusations of heathen idolatry and witchcraft, and the notebooks of travellers and government officials. The full range of sources for Sámi religion has been summarised once again by Håkan Rydving (1993b: 13–29), who has also discussed their strengths and limitations with great insight in his book on source-critical problems (1995; see also, for example, Hagen 2013).

During the long period of conversion, the end of ‘Drum-Time’ as Rydving (1993a) has rendered the concept of *Gáriid áigi*, the general interest in the religious customs of the Sámi did not abate. A combination of exotic arctic environments, the thrill of long distance travel and a hint of devilish paganism proved irresistible to the European imagination. Prominent intellectuals such as Linnaeus travelled to Lappland and afterwards posed for their portraits in the Sámi clothes and equipment that they had acquired (cf. Westman & Utsi 1999: 7), and the shamanic drums were eagerly sought by the museum curators of the world.

Even as late as the mid-nineteenth century it is possible to encounter far-flung echoes of this awareness, of which an example can be found in

Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* from 1850. Exploring hypocrisy, guilt and the nature of sin in a conservative moral climate, Hawthorne sets out his story against the backdrop of Puritan New England in the 1600s, with its ever-present fear of witchcraft and all the dangerous freedoms that this stands for in a community bound by repressive norms. Near the end of the book, a self-confessed witch views a parade of church elders with scorn, reflecting on how many of these same people wear a different expression when they participate in the midnight rituals over which she presides in the forest, and in which all manner of demonic figures take part:

> Many a church-member saw I, walking behind the music, that has danced in the same measure with me, when Somebody was fiddler, and, it might be, an Indian powwow or a Lapland wizard changing hands with us!
>
> Hawthorne 1999 [1850]: 181

It says much that the middle-class readership of the United States, only ten years before the Civil War, should find an unannotated reference to a Sámi sorcerer still so readily comprehensible as an image of satanic agency.

Despite all the sources that we have, inevitably there is a great critical problem in moving back in time to the Viking Age, some six centuries before our ethnographies of Sámi spiritual practice. Sámi religion was not a static entity any more than its Nordic counterpart, and in any attempt to reconstruct its original form we must acknowledge the fact of the enormous geographical variation evident in both the archaeological record and later written sources. These patterns reflect a wide range of local and regional customs in the human relationship to the gods and in the mediation of the supernatural world, and equally important is the recognition that these practices changed over time.

Although many of the elements of Sámi religion recorded by the missionaries are probably of considerable antiquity, there are three aspects of these beliefs that would definitely seem to go back at least as far as the Viking period. All of these are grounded in what we might vaguely term the 'Sámi •hunters' way of thinking': the existence of a thought-world of spirits and ••natural powers the bear hunt and its ritual foundations *noaidevuohta* and the social role of the *noaidi* Each of these will be explored in turn below, through discussions of the Sámi pantheon of deities, the supernatural entities perhaps best conceptualised as 'spirits' and a special class of beings called

rådare (lit. ‘rulers’). Linking all these is the complex Sámi understanding of what we might call the soul, and the loose system of thought within which all these elements were combined. The latter, *noaidevuohta* or ‘that which has to do with the *noaidi*’, is the closest approximation in Sámi culture to the notion of shamanism and thus the counterpart to the possible role of *seiðr* and its related rituals in Nordic society. Together with the individuals at its core, the *noaidi* or ‘shamans’, an exploration of *noaidevuohta* forms the focus of this chapter.

There are surprisingly few general works on Sámi religion, but useful overviews have been produced by Reuterskiöld (1912), Karsten (1955), Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1978), Hætta (1994) and Pentikäinen (1997). In addition the edited collections by Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1985), Ahlbäck (1987), Mebius (2003) and Virdi Kroik (2005) contain much of interest. For directed reading on specific aspects of the Sámi religious world, Rydving’s excellent annotated bibliography provides a natural starting point (1993b).

The world of the gods

The notion of divinity in the Sámi belief system seems to have been a relatively fluid concept. While the names and attributes of gods are recorded beyond any doubt – as discussed below – there remains nonetheless an ambiguity as to the relative status of these beings alongside the extensive range of other supernatural entities.

We know, for example, that all the Sámi peoples believed in a very large variety of ‘spirits’, for want of a better term, living in isolation or in entire communities, and at some level divisible into different hierarchies of power, allegiance and form. Along with the complicated ‘rulers’, and the important category of underground beings of various kinds, all these spirits will be discussed in more detail below. In the context of Sámi divinities, however, it is important to note that in some senses these too could take ‘spiritual’ form, whereby some essence of the god could reside in a particular place or be associated with a certain object, in a manner almost identical to other kinds of spirits. On the one hand this can be seen as an aspect of the godhead, as in the case of the door-wife *Uksáhkká*, who resided in the ground beneath the entrance of the *kåta* tent (see below) – presumably an element of her was simultaneously present under *every* such dwelling. On the other hand however, there seems to have been a sense in which the nature of the divinity

itself changed according to circumstance, becoming in some contexts more a part of the broader environment in a manner akin to that of the spirits of place and the land.

At one level it therefore seems that the Sámi definitions of what constituted a god were utterly unlike those of the Norse, but this need not necessarily be the case. As we have seen in chapter 2, the conventional notions of 'worship' and its components cannot really be said to apply to the Norse pantheon, and I have already stressed that the essential requirement in their relationship with human beings seems to have been the latter's acknowledgement of the gods' inseparability from the natural world – the similarity with the Sámi deities is striking here.

As with all other aspects of Sámi religion, there was a perceived division between deities associated with men and women, to the extent of forming two separate spheres of belief. With some exceptions, the gods associated with each sex were generally of that sex themselves, and linked to activities similarly divided along gender lines. However, within both the male and female groups of deities were gods who occupied a transitional zone between the sexes, and it is not going too far to discuss this in terms of a third gender (there is an obvious link between such concepts and the special gender categories associated with shamanism, discussed in chapters 3 and 5). This aspect of the Sámi gods will be taken up in more detail below.

The names of the gods varied from one part of Sápmi to another, following the divisions of dialect-groups, but in some areas even their attributes and functions differed. This variation related particularly to the world of the dead, and the associated beliefs concerning rebirth and the soul which we shall consider shortly.

In common with many other circumpolar peoples, the Sámi seem to have believed in a supreme divinity while simultaneously relegating this figure to a background role, remote from human affairs. Known by several names – *Ráddiolmmái* or Ráððiáhčči, 'the silent ruler', in SaN – the highest god of the Sámi seems to have been what historians of religions call a *deus otiosus*, that is one who adopted a 'resting' profile in relation to the other deities and the realm of mortals. Connotations of neutrality, or at least impartiality, seem to have attached to this god, despite his association with the ultimate power of

decision-making, and he seems to have been relatively unimportant for human beings.

Among the gods for men were those personifying aspects of nature, such as *Bieggolmmái*, the ‘wind man’, who fought with demons and whose importance was reflected by the vital role played by the wind for those living in the mountains or for those drawing their sustenance from the sea. He was paralleled by *Čáhčolmmái*, the ‘water man’, who had similar powers over lakes and streams, and who could improve fishing luck. *Varaldenolmmái* was the fertility god, whose powers extended into the giving of souls to the newly born, and to the vital fecundity of the reindeer; in some traditions he also took on aspects of the highest god.

The thunder god, *Horagállis*, has already been mentioned, and with his life-giving rain was one of the fundamentals of the Sámi way of life. The water from his storms brought the grass and moss which fed the reindeer, cleansed the air and brought new life to the sick. His anger was also feared, expressed in the lightning which killed animals and people, and changed stones and trees to something other than they had been before (lightning scars and fractures conveyed special properties of supernatural power to a place, and as we shall see below the shamanic drums were sometimes made from the wood of lightning-blasted trees).

One of the most important of the group was *Leaibolmmái*, the ‘alder man’, who was the primary male hunting god. He could control game animals, and bring good fortune to the chase. The element *liejp* in his SaL name (*Liejpålmaj*) can refer to alder bark, the sap of which when mixed with blood produced a powerful substance which possessed a range of ritual properties. It was used to paint the images on the *noaidi*’s drumskins, and could also neutralise the dangerous forces evoked during the hunt. Following the killing of a bear, for example, the mixture was spat into the faces of women to protect them from the bear’s power emanating from its slayer. However, *liejp* can also mean ‘menstrual blood’, an association that leads us to perhaps the most important aspect of Leaibolmmái, because he was the god of the male sphere who also stood astride the blurred gender zone mentioned above. We will return to this aspect of his nature in the section on soul beliefs below.

The strange god *Rota*, mentioned above, is an exception among the Sámi divinities. Terrifying if not actually evil, he seems to have represented all that

was threatening in the environment, as well as in some way being connected with the powers of the underworld. In some circumstances he also appears as a being of disease, and occasionally its cure. As we have seen, he is also believed to be the Sámi deity with closest parallels in the sphere of Eurasian shamanism (Ränk 1981, 1985; Pettersson 1985). Alongside Rota are other, more obscure divinities or major beings, such as *Máttaráddjá*, the 'old one in furs'.

Within the female sphere, the highest goddess was *Máttaráhkká*, the ancestral mother, who was to some extent a female counterpart to the supreme god Ráddiolmmái. Máttaráhkká forms a close group with her three daughters, who were collectively the most important deities for Sámi women (as with the male gods, some of these figures were also significant for the opposite sex, as discussed below). The three sisters were *Sáráhkká*, the fertility goddess of birth and the most important of the daughters, in some ways overshadowing even her mother in the role she played in Sámi society; *Uksáhkká*, the 'door woman'; and *Juoksáhkká*, the 'bow woman'. A fifth goddess, *Jábbmeáhkká*, was seen in some parts of Sápmi as the ruler of the world of the dead (the goddesses are discussed in detail in Bäckman 1984; Myrhaug 1997; see also Rydving 1993b: 49f for other works).

Nature deities of the female sphere included *Ruonanieida*, the goddess of spring and the growing season. She was particularly associated with reindeer, representing the green grass and lichen that provided the main source of nutrition for the animals (Hætta 1994: 15).

The sun, *Beaivi*, also played an important role in Sámi belief, as something between a deity and a personified aspect of both nature and cosmology (the sources are collected and discussed in Westman 1997). Beaivi was a female power, and in many ways can be seen as part of the group of 'mothers' described above, Máttaráhkká and her daughters. Some have argued that the sun was more a cosmic being than a personified god, and that it in fact bore the gods on its rays (Hætta 1994: 8). These writers have taken inspiration from the very few surviving interpretations of drum images that were recorded from Sámi informants, but it is clear that these accounts must be treated with considerable caution: they were often given under duress, and it is likely that some elements of them were deliberately invented to obscure the true meaning

of the images, knowledge which the informant wished to keep from his non-Sámi questioner.

The sun was reflected by *Mánnu*, the moon, who was regarded with a respect almost equal to his solar counterpart (it is interesting that the Sámi viewed the sun as female and the moon as male, unlike most European religions). The similar regard paid to both celestial bodies is easier to understand when one considers the seasonal rhythm of light and darkness in the far north – in winter, the sun disappeared and was literally replaced by the moon as a source of light, often shining almost as brightly against the snow as the sun in summer.

Beliefs concerning the solar and lunar bodies were also extended into other celestial phenomena, especially the Northern Lights, *Guovsahas*, which form such a dramatic element of the winter sky in the far north. These are discussed in more detail below, in the section on magical violence.

Spirits and Rulers in the Sámi cognitive landscape

The notion of spirit beings of various kinds was central to the world-view of the Sámi, but also to their understanding of nature itself, and the landscape through which they moved.

In an earlier article (Price 1998a), I have contrasted the general Sámi perception of landscape with that of their Nordic neighbours. There I argued that the Norse adopted an essentially *transformative* attitude to the natural environment. The Nordic pattern of sedentary settlement is, of course, familiar: farmsteads and villages in more-or-less permanent locations, re-sited only occasionally over time, surrounded by the enclosed field systems, meadows and pathways of the agrarian, pastoral landscape. This is not to deny any mobility in the population, or the presence of peripatetic elements of society, but there is no doubt that the settled agricultural community was the norm throughout the Scandinavian North. Even in areas with a maritime or forest economy, permanent settlement with as much garden cultivation as possible was still the general trend.

The Sámi, by contrast, seem to have viewed their relationship with the land as fundamentally *assimilative* – the landscape being seen as something to be moved through or lightly rested upon in as inconspicuous and noninterventionist a way as possible. This takes its most obvious expression in the portable, temporary settlements of *kåta* tents of various kinds, the

archaeological traces of which in the form of hearths and tent rings contrast sharply with the solid postholes, beam-slots and floor layers of Nordic dwellings. However, we also see it in the other most common element of the Sámi built environment (if it can truly be called that), the numerous varieties of pit constructions. With pits for storage, trapping, food preparation, even dwelling under certain circumstances, it is not inappropriate to talk of a Sámi 'pit landscape', and indeed we know that in later years the Sámi themselves explicitly viewed the land in this way (*e.g.* the descriptions in Turi 1987; cf. Kleppe & Mulk 2006).

Even more interestingly, there is a suggestion in one of our earliest contemporary sources for the Viking world that the Norse also understood this fundamental difference between their own view of the land and that of the Sámi. In the voyage round the north coast of Norway related by the traveller Ohthere (Óttarr?) to the Anglo-Saxon King Ælfred in the late ninth century, he mentions several times that the country of the Norse was settled but that of the *Finnas* (*i.e.* the Sámi) was *eal weste*, 'totally uninhabited',

… buton on feawum stowum styccemælum wiciað Finnas, on huntoðe on wintra & on sumera on fiscaðe be þære sæ … except for a few places here and there where the Finnas have their camps, hunting in winter, and in summer fishing in the sea.

Ohthere's Account 1; text and translation after Lund & Fell 1984: 18

Thus to this particular Norwegian, the place where the Sámi lived was unoccupied. It is in this subliminal and almost contradictory context that I believe we should view the Sámi notion of spirits – and, in some circumstances, gods – seeing them as invisible inhabitants of a cultural landscape that was in many ways also invisible. The idea of the *super*natural is also misleading here, because the fundamental presence of these beings in the landscape was *entirely* 'natural' and should not be separated from the human and animal populations (I would argue that this probably applied equally to the Norse belief system). Indeed, there is a sense in which the landscape and its spiritual occupants were synonymous (see Price 2002 for a short case study in Russian Sápmi based on my fieldwork on the White Sea).

Some of this is reflected in place-names, and their relationship with religious practice or belief is one of the great lacunae in Sámi scholarship,

very little work having been done in this area. With the possible exception of localities invoking the various names of the thunder-god, there seems to have been much less tendency towards theophoric place-names among the Sámi than among the Norse. The most holy places of all were left un-named, such as the sacred flat-topped mountain Nammatj (‘No-Name’) in Aktse near the Sarek region of Swedish Sápmi.

In terms of the cultural landscape, for the Sámi we have to think in terms of what Richard Bradley has called ‘an archaeology of unaltered, natural places’ (2000: chs 1, 3). This links to the idea of assimilation mentioned above, in which sacrificial sites, graves, stone circles and offering places are in subordinate relationships to their physical environment. In essence, they constitute markers and points of notation to indicate the wider significance of sacred space (Mulk 1994 provides an overview of this; for case studies of the Varanger region and elsewhere in Norway, see Vorren & Eriksen 1993; Schanche 2000; Fossum 2006; Kraft 2010; Äikäs 2015; an essential critique of these concepts is to be found in Spangen 2017).

The saajvh and their sacred landscape

Most of the supernatural denizens of the Sámi world dwelled, like their Norse counterparts, in water or in rock. The most prominent spirits of place were those of the holy mountains and lakes, a geographical location of spiritual power that for obvious reasons was dominant in the far north. The most developed terminologies for these beings derive from the South Sámi culture area, where they were called *saajvh* (SaS, sing. *saajve*). In the southern region they were associated with mountains and rocks, while among the Lule Sámi they lived in lakes. Across all the regions they formed a combined concept of both spirit and place, one and the same.

Alongside the ancestors, the *saajvh* were the most important of the Sámi spirits and were intimately linked to the power of the *noaidi* (the classic work on these beings is Bäckman 1975). The *saajvh* were quite small, about 1.5 m high, and could take both human and animal form. They were of both sexes, and at least one male *saajve* – a *saajveålmah* – lived in every mountain. On occasion up to five male *saajvh* dwelt in the same holy peak, and sometimes there were whole families of these beings, males, females and their children.

The key to their relationship with human beings was that the *saajvh* could be owned, in an entirely literal sense – they could be bought, sold and

inherited. The different *saajvh* living in different places had different values, and status was conferred by the number of such beings that one possessed. It is important to understand that in the South Sámi area, *saajvh* ownership was *the* primary indicator of social standing, carrying far more weight that the possession of reindeer. A *saajve* spirit entered into a kind of contract with a human, in which it would serve its owner and protect his or her life and property. The most valuable were those who had been inherited through several generations, called *aarp'saajvh*, essentially a kind of protective family spirit. If a person died and had not allocated the inheritance of his or her *saajvh*, the relatives of the deceased could compete for them by offering sacrifices. Both men and women could own these spirits, though there were some that could only be owned by the *noaidi*.

The animal-*saajvh* served only the 'shamans', and were inherited from one •to another. They took several forms: *saajveledtie* – a bird spirit used to gain •information about our world or the upper world *saajveguelie* – a fish spirit •which could travel in water or in the underworld of the dead *saajvesarva* – a bull-reindeer spirit which, unlike the others, was a physical being. This was used in conflicts between the *noaidi*, embodied in the fighting of reindeer males during the mating season The term *saajvh* could also refer to the mountains that the spirits lived inside, and to the meltwater that ran off them. The latter was thought to have healing powers and could be bathed in or drunk. The *noaidi* would enter the sacred mountains, which were also thought to be gates to the other worlds. Inside the rock the *noaidi* would talk with the *saajvh*, *jojk* with them, eat, drink and dance. There are also reverences to *noaidi* having sex with the *saajvh*. The humans and spirits contacted one another through dreams, and there were many kinds of sacrifice offered to them, not only at their mountains but also in the *kåta*.

Among the Lule Sámi we find a range of similar concepts, based around a general category of spirits called *vuojnodime*, 'the invisible ones' (who in turn referred to human beings as *almmolattjat*, 'the visible ones'). These beings spoke their own, very complex language which they shared with the *noaidi* in a kind of secret network of communication. There were helping spirits in human form who seem to have been the equivalent of the South Sámi *saajvh*, and who similarly appeared in male and female incarnations called respectively *basseváreålmmå* and *basseváreniejda*, meaning 'holy mountain

men/women'. A third form, *gadniha*, could be of both sexes. We also see the same tripartite divisions of animal spirits, the *basseváreláddе* ('holy mountain bird'), *basseváreguolle* ('holy mountain fish') and *basseváesarves* ('holy mountain reindeer bull'). There were special places were these beings could cross the barrier between the worlds and communicate with humans, called *basseváruxa* and *gadnihuxa*, meaning 'door for the holy mountain spirits'.

The North Sámi again had similar concepts of sacred mountains (*bassevárit*), but the names of the spirits were instead directly linked to the *noaidi*. Thus the animal spirits were called *noaideloddi* ('*noaidi*-bird'), *noaideguolli* ('*noaidi*-fish') and *noaidesarvvis* ('*noaidi*-reindeer bull'). As in the Lule Sámi area we also find an exact parallel for the 'invisible ones', in a term with the same meaning in SaN, *oaidnemeahttumat*. As before, these spirits called people *albmulaččat*, 'the visible ones'.

There were also other types of spirits associated with the *noaidi*. These were of several kinds, such as the *nåejtesvoejkene* (SaS) and *noaidegázzi* (SaN), broadly translating to 'spirits of the *noaidi*'. There were also helping spirits in human form and of both sexes, such as the North Sámi *háldit* and *uldat*. We know relatively little about any of these beings, other than that they were summoned and manipulated during the soul journey. In all these instances, an important distinction was clearly made between the protective spirits such as the *saajvh* and the helping spirits that were engaged in the ritual performances of *noaidevuohta*.

It can thus be seen that the *saajvh* and their analogues in the different culture areas of Sápmi formed a vital part of Sámi society, and that social status at the most fundamental level rested on a relationship with the supernatural. This was both personal – even, on occasion, intimate – and expressed in a structure of power and control. It is also important to recognise the spatial aspect of the *saajvh*, as the patterns of ownership applied to both spirits and their mountains, and thus of the rights to graze and exploit the resources of these areas (see Bergsland's 1985 work on mapping 'inheritance-mountains' among the southern Sámi). Very close parallels to this can be discerned in the Old Norse sources, with the numerous holy mountains and their inhabitants that appear in dreams, the various beings who emerge from the rocks in visions of warning or doom, and not least the personified aspects of family fortune represented by the *fylgjur* and *hamingjur*. There does not

seem to have been the same developed system of formal ownership, but the essential framework of human-spirit relations is very similar.

Julefolket and the dead-child tradition

One category of Sámi spirits is worthy of separate discussion here, due to their very close affinities with similar beings in Norse belief. These *Julefolk*, 'Yule-people', appear in some of the earliest sources, being found in Schefferus (1956 [1673]: 105) and in Leem (1767: 482) as the *joulo-gazze*. Today they are still known as *javlla-stállo* or *rähttuna* (Mulk 1998). These spirits were partly connected with the dead, and partly with other, less easily identifiable beings. They appeared during the Yule period, approximately between mid-November and early January, and always travelled in a large body, often in the form of a *rajd* (a sort of caravan formed of sleds, usually pulled by reindeer) drawn by mice and lemmings. Riding through the sky, the *Julefolk* would move around habitations at night, drawn by the sound of children playing. Appearing in the form of small humanoid figures, the spirits would then attempt to bear the children away on their mice-drawn sleds. For fear of the *Julfolk*, children were encouraged to be silent at this time, a feature common to other Sámi responses to dangerous spirits, such as those dwelling in the Northern Lights as discussed below.

In many ways these spirits have affinities with the 'riders' of Norse belief, especially in the context of the *gandreið* and similar phenomena mentioned in chapter 3, and the later folklore on the Wild Hunt of Óðinn (see chapter 6). Earlier writers such as Fritzner (1877: 157) identified the *Julefolk* directly with Óðinn, whom he believed to be synonymous with the leader of these spirits, a being called *Jauloherra*. Some support may be found for this, and indeed in the later medieval tales Óðinn's riders are found by many names, some of which are very close to that of the Sámi spirits, for example the *Jolaskreiði* of western Norway (Aasen 1853: 27–8; de Vries 1957: § 167) and the *Jolasveinar* (Wang 1871: 9–10), the latter still current in Icelandic folklore. Óðinn himself was also identified in *Ágrip* (1) as the being behind the institution of Yule, through his name *Jólnir*.

However, it is more important to view the *Julefolk* alongside the Wild Hunt of Óðinn as yet another common feature in the ancient belief systems of northern Europe, in this case once again spanning both the Germanic and Finno-Ugric cultures.

Another category of these spirits among the Sámi was formed by the souls of children who had been exposed to die in the mountains, whose wails could be heard by travellers in the high country. Again, these have parallels in Nordic culture, and they are almost unique among the Sámi spirit beings in that a very considerable body of work has been specifically devoted to them. Pentikäinen's classic thesis on the 'dead-child tradition' (1968) is still the most comprehensive study.

Rulers and the invisible world

The Sámi world also had many other invisible occupants, all personifying positive and negative aspects of the physical environment. These include spirits of the drowned, or a special kind of spirit that had the supernatural power to hear everything that was said in a particular place. There were also counterparts to the Norse idea of trolls and other similar beings, called *stálo* by the Sámi (they could be either a generic or an individual, *the* Stálo). Like the ogres of the Scandinavians, the *stálo* were large, dirty and stupid, and there are many stories of them being outwitted by the clever Sámi.

To these we can add the more widely-recognised category of beings found in several circumpolar cultures and mentioned above, known generically as 'rulers', or the 'Owners/Masters of the Animals'. These spirits are found in their most developed form among the Native American tribes, especially in the east where they have been studied by Hultkrantz (1961a and papers therein). Their function remained generally constant, and was "to exercise stewardship over the wild animals, especially the animals which are hunted by man. [The Owner] protects these animals, sees to it that if they have been slain by man they get a correct ritual burial, and sanctions or prevents the hunter's slaying of them" (Hultkrantz 1961b: 54–5). We may note the clear relationship between the Owners and the concept of shamanic animal guardians, explicitly so in the case of the North American examples (Hultkrantz 1961b: 61–3; for north-west European and Siberian parallels see also papers by Kock, Liungman and Paulson from the same publication; Rooth 1961a notes some later Scandinavian examples).

In Sámi culture, the most developed set of ruler-beliefs related to the bear. The largest and most dangerous animal of the Sámi environment, the bear was central for a great number of rituals. These have been studied extensively and will not be discussed in detail here, but we can make some brief observations.

The bear was regarded as more than an equal of humans, being simultaneously divine and animal in nature. It was the primary ruler figure, and controlled not just the spirits of bears and their supply as food resources but also the natural environment of land and water. It was thought to understand the Sámi language, and was treated with great respect. Hunters took care not to speak to each other during an attack on a bear's den, so it would not realise their ethnic origin. The opposite was true for the post-hunt rituals, when it was hoped the bear would understand how respectful the Sámi were being to its soul.

The *noaidi* played a significant role in the hunt, and his drum was decorated with silver nails for every successful bear-killing that it had engineered (several examples of these are still in existence). There were also important sexual overtones for the bear hunt, with the strict segregation of women from its rituals, and an association between the successful human bear-hunter and the dangerous sexual potency of the slain animal. After the consumption of its flesh, the undamaged bones of the bear were buried with care in a ritual found in varying forms in several parts of the circumpolar region, in order to ensure the renewal of its soul and the continued provision of bears for future hunts (see Fjellström 1981 [1755] for an early ethnography of bear-hunting rituals, Edsman 1994 for the most comprehensive survey, and Elgström & Manker 1984 for an illustrated cycle of the ceremonies; bear burials are covered by Zachrisson & Iregren 1974; Mulk & Iregren 1995; Myrstad 1996; and the very similar shamanic bear rituals among the Aino of Japan and Sakhalin are discussed by Akino 1999 and Utagawa 1999).

Names, souls and sacrifice

We have seen above the importance of Norse soul beliefs in the structure of *seiðr* and its related rituals. How do these compare to the equivalent patterns among the Sámi?

Firstly we can observe that the gender categories that characterise the sorcerers of the Norse are in a sense enshrined even from birth in Sámi society. It is in connection with the sex of the unborn child that we encounter the contradictory sexualities embodied by two of the major gods described above – Leaibolmmái from the male sphere, and Juoksáhkká from the female sphere. It is clear that the Sámi believed all human embryos to be originally female, and that special intervention was required if a male child was desired. To this end, sacrifices were offered to the bow-woman Juoksáhkká, the third

of Máttaráhkká's daughters. The bow was an exclusively male weapon, and it is here that we see Juoksáhkká's contradictory nature, through her association as a goddess of the female sphere with a tool forbidden for women to use. Her aspect here as a goddess of change is exactly paralleled in the male sphere by Leaibolmmái, the alder man, as we have seen in his name which can also mean the 'man of menstrual blood'. The binary opposition of these two gods enshrines the fundamental contradictory principle that underlies much of Sámi religion: the two deities hate one another as representatives of the opposite sex, and are locked in a perpetual struggle for the souls of the unborn, while at the same time they contain crucial aspects of the other's nature.

Elevated above this conflict, and to some extent presiding over it, was the creator goddess of fertility, Sáráhkká. In her supreme power – and distanced from the detailed concerns of her sisters – she was probably the most important deity for all the Sámi peoples, of both sexes. She was also one of the goddesses of birth, as her name was linked to the verb for 'cleaving', the act of opening the womb.

During the Middle Ages, as Christian ideas began to filter through into Sámi society, and especially in connection with the main missionary drives of the seventeenth century and later, Sáráhkká began to be identified with the Virgin Mary; by a similar token, Máttaráhkká took on the identity of Anna, Mary's mother. These incorporations of pre-Christian ideas into a Christian world-view were also reflected in material culture even down to our own times. This is seen in the frequent use of 'A' and 'M' symbols in Sámi silverwork, especially on women's belt fittings, and in the appearance of small groups of three figures which have their ancestry in the three daughters of Máttaráhkká.

In terms of the individual soul, the main distinction in Sámi culture seems to have been between what we would call the living and the dead, though this division was not conceptualised in the same way. The world of the living seems to have been conceptualised as being flat, and most importantly, thin. Only a crust seems to have separated our world from that of the dead, which was under the ground and rotated 180° to form a reversed, upside-down realm. There were several names for this underground world, including Jábmiidáibmu and Rota-áibmu. The dead lived here, and walked in the footsteps of the living like reflections in a mirror. This relationship across the

worlds was crucial in ways that connected with the nature of the soul and the importance of the ancestors (see Pettersson 1957 for an extensive analysis of the role of the dead in Sámi life).

The definition of life was dependant on the extent of social contact with others, and in a sense the fact of breath or a heart-beat was irrelevant to this. The terms for relatives merely changed grammatical form after death, as an indicator of which world they lived in. The dead remained literally alive so long as the living remembered them. The ‘dead’ could also be actively involved in daily life, for example by minding children or watching over a reindeer herd. The ancestors would also appear in dreams, imparting information, demanding certain things, and so on.

Already we can see parallels with the complex Norse soul beliefs, and particularly the spirit beings connected to the family line such as the *fylgjur*.

Sometimes children were given the names of ancestors, thereby conferring on them the identity of the dead person and in a sense enabling him or her to be reborn. Men were given the names of good hunters, while women were called after those who had given birth painlessly. Occasionally names were given while their owners were still alive, and in these cases both bearers of the name took on aspects of the same individual. It could also happen that a child was given the ‘wrong’ name, and for example a baby that cried a lot could be thought to be protesting against its name. In such instances it was possible for a name to be changed by means of special rituals in the care of women; there are records of this happening four or five times to the same person. Sickness could also be a sign of an unsuitable name, again connected to the opinion of the dead.

The Sámi dead seem to have constantly striven to return to the realm of the living, not as revenants or ghosts but in the sense of being reborn through naming. A pregnant woman might dream of several different ancestors, all vying with each other to return in their names. The correct name might also be revealed through prayer to Sáráhkká, or by consulting a *noaidi*. When the name was chosen in a kind of baptism ceremony to Sáráhkká, the child was also given a name-fish, a *nammaguolli*, which was perceived as living in a certain lake or river near the young child’s home. Throughout life, a Sámi would discuss important decisions with his or her name-fish, and in later times when a person was forced to attend church they would often apologise to the

name-fish first. In some areas of Sápmi only men received these fish, and sometimes only men who would become *noaidi*.

Materially the world of the dead was rich, but also boring because it was a lonely place. Above all, there was no *jojk* there, and thus no ‘contact’, no rhythm of life. Wanting to be rejoined with their living relatives, the dead would try to draw them down to their own world, not out of malice but simply from a desire for company. In the living world this was manifested as sickness, and if the dead began to get a grip on a gravely ill person then it could be time to call in a *noaidi*.

It is here that one of the concepts of sacrifice enters the Sámi religious world, as the dead were sometimes willing to be distracted with food and might thereby stop trying to draw their living kinsfolk down to their world. The *noaidi* could negotiate with the dead, and perhaps agree on a price to be paid in reindeer. In ritually killing the animal, it would pass to the other world and provide sustenance for the dead. If the sick person became ill again, perhaps it was a sign that the ancestors had eaten the reindeer, and wanted some more.

There seems to have been no Sámi concept of an abstract and eternal afterlife, which stresses again the importance of this contact between the worlds. In many ways a relationship with the ‘dead’, the ancestors, was more vital than a connection to the gods. Among the helping spirits, the most important category was also that of the ancestors, in the sense that they blended attributes of humans and more ethereal beings from another world.

Noaidevuohta and the noaidi

At the very centre of this complex of spiritual thought, and linking every part of it, was the figure of the *noaidi*. It was the *noaidi* who was responsible for communication between the human community and the supernatural world that enclosed it, with the spirits, the gods and the ancestral dead. The *noaidi* possessed the power to see into the different upper and lower worlds inhabited by these beings, and to journey there with the aid of his primary tool, the drum. In the *noaidi*'s care was the health of Sámi society, both physical and spiritual, and also the ultimate responsibility for the health of the reindeer and the hunt which provided the people's food. In negotiations with the powers that owned the animals, the *noaidi* ensured the continual renewal of the herds, and the perpetuation of the Sámi way of life. Louise Bäckman has sometimes referred to the role of the *noaidi* as that of a socio-religious guarantor (*e.g.* 1985: 212; 2005), which neatly encapsulates the networks of dependence that bound this figure to his – or, as we shall see below, perhaps sometimes *her* – community.

Although there are many descriptions of inherited shamanic powers, there are indications that the training of some *noaidi* seems to have been relatively formalised. Von Westen describes how "många sätta sina barn i skola til fjälls hos Trollmästare" ('many send their children to the mountains to be taught by the sorcerers'; Lundmark 1977: 56–7). Such teaching of magic skills was also mentioned by a Christian Sámi, Kerstin Jakobsdotter, who wrote to von Westen complaining of the propagation of witchcraft in this manner; she also added the interesting information that some of the *noaidi* refused to pass on their skills, saying that they "hafwa givfwit kropp och siähl för den konsten" ('they have given body and soul for this art'; Burman 1910 [late 1720s?]: 400). We know that the 'apprentice' *noaidi* were set various tests, as when their teacher would let lose his helping spirits in the *kåta*, and the younger man would have to follow their progress round the tent.

Such training recalls Guðríðr's description of how she had been taught the *varðlok(k)ur* with which she summoned the spirits to Þorbiorg's *seiðr* performance, as described in *Eíriks saga rauða* and discussed in chapter 3 above.

Outside this teacher-pupil relationship, only one *noaidi* could work in specific area, and there were clear concepts of territoriality. However, if an

occasion demanded it then several *noaidi* could also gather together for collective rituals. Another source even suggests that the 'current' *noaidi* could be elected by community vote, and paid a kind of salary – perhaps in the form of something resembling a tithe (Kildal 1945 [*c.*1730]: 139).

The *noaidi* was not least a kind of traveller, and the means of effecting this wandering of the soul could vary considerably. One of the most common was by means of the holy lakes. Called by different names in the various regions of Sápmi, these lakes seem to have been conceptualised as double-bottomed, perhaps best visualised in cross-section as a double cone with the twin apexes placed point to point. The *noaidi* dived into the lake in this world and swam down, but on reaching the bottom continued 'downwards' in the same direction, which was simultaneously an ascent towards the lake's second surface in the mirror world of the dead.

The relationship with the spirit world was the root of the *noaidi*'s abilities, and the power to encounter the dead and the rulers of nature was fundamental. Beyond this, however, the *noaidi* were above all individuals, and the many stories of them that survive today emphasise this. They could be good or bad, and their powers could vary. Importantly, there were many different categories of Sámi sorcerer, some of which were forms of *noaidi* and others were not. The key point here is of course that this is a similar pattern to that seen in chapter 3 for the Viking-Age Norse. Once again, we can examine the range of ritual specialists and their functions, and set this in a wider context.

One of the most direct routes to a deeper exploration of a religious phenomenon is through the terminologies within which its contemporary understanding was encoded. As Håkan Rydving has noted, although considerable research has been devoted to the various dialects of the Sámi lexicon, these studies have concentrated almost entirely on non-religious aspects of life such as fishing and hunting, furs and skins, kinship structures, snow and the colours of reindeer (see Rydving 1987: 185 for references to these works). Prior to Rydving himself, only Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1978) had devoted any attention to the meanings of words relating to Sámi shamanism. However, there now exists a comprehensive, albeit selective, study of words and terminologies concerning *noaidevuohta* which can be of great assistance to our attempt to reconstruct the patterns of religion in early medieval Scandinavia (Rydving 1987; see also Rydving 1995: 72–3).

Rydving's terminology of *noaidevuohta*

If we are to seek reflections of early Sámi shamanic practice in these sources from centuries later, we must naturally observe extreme caution. The question of the antiquity of the words themselves is taken up below, but the primary problem concerns the ways in which the meaning and comprehension of these terms have changed through time. We must also consider the fashion by which they have been preserved for us, especially as certain regions or dialect groups are represented in the surviving material to a far greater degree than others.

We should first remember that the earliest terms recorded in the context of the pre-Christian Sámi religion as a living faith were written down by individuals "whose mission in life was to replace the Saami religious rites and conceptions with new ones", and who viewed the shamanic world almost entirely negatively (Rydving 1987: 186, 188). As missionary activity continued, from the seventeenth century onwards both Sámi society and language entered what Rydving has called a 'postshamanistic' phase, where these words became relocated from a context of religious belief to the later terminologies of magic: it is necessary to distinguish between the *noaidi* as 'shaman' and the *noaidi* as 'diviner' or 'magician' (Rydving 1987: 185ff; see also Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 62–89; Itkonen 1946). At the same time we must remain open to the threads of continuity represented by the use of the same words in different contexts over time. There also exists a second category in the postshamanistic phase, when words connected with concepts of sorcery and witchcraft appear unrelated to the early shamanic vocabularies; the nature of the rituals or individuals which these terms describe is also discussed below. All these stages and word-forms are obviously further affected by the regional variation in the Sámi dialects and dialect-groups, and we must contend with the fact that only a small fraction of the original lexicon of ritual has survived.

Rydving's survey of shamanistic and postshamanistic words is summarised below, together with other sources from Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1978), presenting a general picture of the ways in which the *noaidi* and related functionaries were defined. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of Rydving's terminologies, as he has designated "the different contexts that had the *noaidi* at their centre" (1987: 188). Both early missionary sources, including biblical glosses, and postshamanistic records are used, with

reference to the relevant orthographies and dictionaries. Where it is possible to make a distinction, the following words and terminologies relate only to male figures, as the sources relating to female shamans and performers of magic are discussed separately below. Unless otherwise noted, all words are given in SaN according to Nielsen's orthography (1932–38) following Rydving and his comments on the translation of glosses from other European languages besides English (1987: 186, 189); page numbers are not generally given for dictionary references which naturally follow alphabetical entries.

We can begin with the most common word used for early Sámi religious figures, together with its variants and – more importantly – its derivatives which can give us a shadowy idea of what the word actually meant in its context. The following represent the earliest recorded occurrences of *noaidi* in

all its forms, including its incorporation in verbs:

Word	*Given meaning*	*Date*	*Source*
noyde	‘prophet, diviner, sorcerer’	1723	Randulf 1903: 13ff
noid	‘priest and prophet of sorcery’	1728–31	Skanke 1910: 104; 1945: 205
noyd	‘wise man, diviner’	1730	Kildal 1945: 105
noaaide	‘sorcerer, wise man’	1767	Leem 1767: 450ff
noaaid	‘witch-prophet’	1767	Jessen 1767: 46, 53ff
nåite, nåide	‘sorcerer, diviner’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåitats	‘a small diviner’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåiteswuot	‘black art’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåitot	‘conjure’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 299
nåitom	‘witchery’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 299
nåitogåtet	‘begin practicing sorcery’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780:

			299
nåitotet	‘bewitch’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 299
nåitastallet	‘practice sorcery, boast that one can conjure’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåitast-alleje	‘one that practices sorcery or boasts of his/her sorcery’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåitastal-lem	‘sorcery’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
nåites	‘what has to do with sorcery and witchery’	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 298
SaS *noåjdie*	‘sorcerer, wizard; one being in charge of the troll-drum (*gievrie*)’ Härjedalen, Oviken, Vilhelmina		Hasselbrink 1981–85
SaU *nåýdee*	‘sorcerer’		Schlachter 1958
SaL *nåi’te*	‘sorcerer, shaman’		Grundström 1946–54
SaN *noai’de*	‘sorcerer, wizard’		Nielsen 1932–38
SaE *noaid*	‘sorcerer’ Pasvik, Petsamo, Nuorti-järvi, Kildin, Ter		Itkonen 1958

Variations on the word *noaidi* are also found in the 1811 Sámi translation of the Old Testament, used for words which Kapelrud (1967) has suggested may have shamanic overtones even in Hebrew. These are found in 1 Sam 28:3, Is 3:2, Is 8:19, Is 44:25, Jer 27:9 and Jer 29:8. In the 1895 translation, *noaidi* is replaced on most occasions by *einustæg'gje*, 'diviner' (Bible 1881 & 1895; cf. Rydving 1987: 190f). In Rydving's postshamanistic usage, the SaN word *noaidi* is paralleled in all Sámi dialects, appearing as *nåejtie* in SaS, *noajdde* in SaL, *noaidi* in SaI and *nåidd* in SaSk; the word is found in Finnish as *noita*. Lagerkrantz's general dictionary (1939) translates *nuojtie* as 'diviner, sorcerer' and cites sources in Snåsa, Tysfjord, Karesuando, Lyngen and Nesseby. In the individual dictionaries the same words or variants of them are translated as follows, together with the places where such uses were noted: In terms of the antiquity of *noaidi* and its variants, Collinder (1977: 117) has noted the occurrence of *najt* in the Ugric language Mansi, which would theoretically place it in "the stratum of Sámi words that are reckoned to be at least 4000 years old" (Rydving 1987: 191; see also Wickman 1965: 503). We can know nothing of the meaning of this word at so early a date, but the long-term chronological and geographical consistency of its later meaning is suggestive here.

Rydving (1987: 192) has also noted the verb *noaidastâd'dât* or *noaidastâllât*, meaning 'practice sorcery or magic' in SaN (Nielsen 1932–38) and 'give an air of knowing how to conjure' in SaL (Grundström 1946–54). In Jokkmokk the present participle of this verb therefore denotes someone that is practicing sorcery or who wants to appear to be doing so.

There are still further words for shamanistic figures which are more limited in distribution, being found only in certain dialects, and perhaps therefore indicating regional variation in the kinds of rituals these people performed. Rydving (1987: 192f) gives the following examples: SOUTHERN SÁMI WORDS (SAS)

noåjdies	'enchanting man; someone that can divine'	Lagerkrantz 1939
	Tännäs, Snåsa, Stensele, Härjedalen	Hasselbrink 1981–85
noåjdies-baarnie	'son of a sorcerer' Stensele	Hasselbrink 1981–85
noåjdume	'sorcery' Røros	Hasselbrink 1981–85

CENTRAL SÁMI WORDS

noai'dohæg'gje	'someone that causes someone else enchantment'; Lyngen, Jokkmokk	Lagerkrantz 1939; Grundström 1946–54
SaU *nùidadahka*	'brought about by sorcery'	Schlachter 1958

EASTERN SÁMI WORDS (SAE)

noitmaš	'sorcery' Nuortijärvi	Itkonen 1958
noitlaššat	'conjure, practice sorcery' Nuortijärvi, Pasvik	Itkonen 1958
noaideluaššat	'conjure, mumble an enchanting song in one's sleep'; Pasvik	Itkonen 1958

Linked to the later uses and variants of *noaidi* are its derivatives, that is words relating to the general concept of *noaidevuohta*. These are more descriptively detailed than those contained in the missionaries' compilations, but due to their date must be treated with more caution if we are to suggest any earlier applications in a Sámi religious context. It is immediately clear how many of the words contain references to some kind of chanting or trance ritual:

noåjtot	'sing an enchanting song; divine; conjure'	Lagerkrantz 1939
	Tännäs, Snåsa, Arjeplog, Karesuando, Lyngen	
SaS *noåjdudh*	'conjure; sign an enchanting song; beat the troll-drum (gievrie); divineof comparison with the possible'	Hasselbrink 1981–85
	Vilhelmina, Offerdal, Forstviken, Undersåker, Härjedalen, Oviken, Snåsa	
SaU *nåýdoot*	'conjure'	Schlachter 1958
SaL *nåi'ŧot*	'conjure, practice sorcery; [in southern Gallivare] bewitch'	Grundström 1946–54
SaN *noai'dot*	'practice sorcery, witchcraft'	Nielsen 1932–38
SaSk *noaidat*	'conjure, practice sorcery' Pasvik, Suonikylä	Itkonen 1958

Specialist noaidi

Besides these general constructions around the *noaidi* concept, there also occur a number of highly specialised terms which reflect a more specific terminology (Rydving 1987; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 67–78). This

describes a kind of specialised *noaidi*, with individual areas of skill and function, and several regional traditions can be perceived.

The Kautokeino noaidi

In Kautokeino in the mid-nineteenth century there were still memories of three different groupings of *noaidi*, recorded in SaN in the prison memoirs of a Sámi who had rebelled against Norwegian rule (Hætta 1958; Rydving 1987: 199f). Some of the terms are also found in the SaN dictionaries.

The most terrible and feared of the three was the *borânoai'de*, the 'eater- or eating-*noaidi*' who had the power to kill by consuming the souls of his enemies (see also Qvigstad 1927: 440). The verb *borrât*, 'bite', was used in the sense of killing by sorcery (Olsen 1910 [*c.*1715]: 96), and the importance of the teeth is emphasised. There are signs that the power of a *noaidi* would decrease with age, and we know that the loss of one's teeth was a symbol for this. Thus the SaN *bānetæbme*, 'toothless', also meant 'who has lost the power to practice sorcery' (Nielsen & Nesheim 1962–69: 5, 109). Sometimes other compositions also reflect the age of the shaman, such as SaE *noitkalles* for 'old *noaidi*-man' (Itkonen 1958), and this may be seen in the same context.

A second type was the *goanstâšæg'gje*, who could harm people and property but could not kill. This figure was also called a *guwlar*, which is a term that reoccurs in SaS with the additional power of healing (see below). A third type, the *juovsâhæg'gje*, could divert the evil of the other two kinds of *noaidi*.

All these *noaidi* possessed the capacity to do evil, unlike a second category of sorcerer called a *gæi'do*. These seem to have instead had great shape-shifting abilities, and were able to transform themselves not only into animals but even into landforms (Hætta 1958). These men are also found in Nielsen's dictionary (1932–38) as *(čâlmĕ-) gæi'do*, defined as 'one who bewitches people's sight'.

The Gällivare noaidi

A similar pattern can be observed in the memoirs of the Lule Sámi Johan Fankki from Gällivare, deposited in 1948 in the ULMA archives at Uppsala (see Rydving 1987: 200f). This work, of which the Sámi title translates to 'A story about ancient *noaidis*', is one of the most valuable and specific of such descriptions to have survived.

Fankki describes four types of *noaidi* to Hætta's three. The worst of these was called a *piedjē-nåi'tē*, a 'sender-*noaidi*', who expressed anger by negotiating with the buried dead and sending their spirits to attack his enemies, driving them insane. A second kind, the *sāvvē-nåi'tē* or 'wisher-*noaidi*', was almost as feared, but instead of raising the dead instead directed curses at his opponents. The third kind, which Fankki calls by the rather garbled Swedish-Sámi hybrid name of *frimurar-nåi'tē*, 'freemason-*noaidi*', was also evil and had in some way entered into a contract that bound himself to the powers of darkness.

The fourth kind of *noaidi* described by Fankki was the *tivvō-nåi'tē*, a '*noaidi* that puts right' whose task was to divert the attacks of the spirits summoned by the *piedjē-nåi'tē*, and also to generally protect people from the offensive sorcery of the other kinds.

To these Norwegian and Swedish schemes we can also look briefly eastwards and add a few additional terms. Among the Finnish Sámi, Itkonen noted the *kir'di noai'di*, the '*noaidi* who flys', who could move through the air and take animal form.

A typology of noaidi?

When we combine all these traditions from different areas of Sápmi, a consistent pattern emerges with four categories of sorcerer: POWERFUL *NOAIDI*, USUALLY WITH EVIL OR AGGRESSIVE FUNCTIONS

SaN *borânoai'de*	'eater-*noaidi*'	Hætta 1958
SaL *piedjē-nåi'tē*	'sender-*noaidi*'	Fankki 1948 (archive)
SaL *sāvvē-nåi'tē*	'wisher-*noaidi*'	Fankki 1948 (archive)
SaL *frimurar-nåi'tē*	'freemason-*noaidi'*	Fankki 1948 (archive)
SaE *kir'di noai'di*	'flyer-*noaidi'*	Itkonen 1946: 116

OTHER SORCERERS (*ALSO NOAIDI?*) WITH EVIL OR AGGRESSIVE FUNCTIONS

SaN *goanstâšæg'gje*	'one who harms by sorcery'?	Hætta 1958
SaN *guwlar*	'one who harms and cures by sorcery'?	Hætta 1958
SaS *guwlar*	'one who cures people with the help of conjurations (not with medicine)'	Lagerkrantz 1939

NOAIDI WITH PROTECTIVE FUNCTIONS AGAINST THE POWERS OF EVIL *NOAIDI*

SaN *juovsâhæg'gje*	'one who diverts the evil of a *noaidi'*	Hætta 1958
SaL *tivvō-nåi'tē*	'*noaidi* that puts right'	Fankki 1948 (archive)

OTHER KINDS OF SORCERERS

SaN *gæi'do*	'one who performs wonders'?	Hætta 1958
SaN(*čâlmĕ*-)gæi'do	'one who bewitches people's sight'	Nielsen 1932–38

This again seems remarkably similar to the functional divisions among the Norse sorcerers, and also reflects a similar variation in the complex of magical forms (*seiðr*, *gandr* and so on). The last category of Sámi sorcerers, those who definitely do not seem to have been *noaidi* as such, can also be expanded.

Diviners, sorcerers and other magic-workers

The terms that denote individuals skilled in the working of magic cover a very wide range of practices, and are difficult to interpret due to their preservation solely in the later, postshamanistic records. However, they may still be of assistance in reconstructing some of the less tangible aspects of late Sámi magic.

Among the names for other types of magic-workers, we find the following:

SaN *diet'te*	'one who knows a thing or two, versed in magic'	Nielsen 1932–38
SaN *siei'de*	'sorcerer' used in Kildin as a subordinate sense of the word for 'rock or stone which has been an object of worship'	Nielsen 1932–38
SaL *skäddar*	'one who bewitches people's sight'	Grundström 1946–54
SaKld *kivr*	'sorcerer' (linked to the god Kārve?)	Itkonen 1958
SaTer *kāirve*	'sorcerer' (linked to the god Kārve?)	Itkonen 1958
SaTer *kiemsdesniei'te*	'drum-sorcerer'	Itkonen 1958
SaE *tsjal'bme keäi'du*	'one who creates illusions'	Itkonen 1946
SaE *tsulidiije*	'one who whispers'	Itkonen 1946

SaE *oinoålma*	‘one who dreams’	Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 70, after Hallström in archive

As for the *noaidi*, there also exist a number of words relating to the abilities and types of spells and rituals performed by these other categories of sorcerers:

SaS *västies*	‘evil, enchanting’	Lagerkrantz 1939
SaC *goan’stâ*	‘art, art of magic’ Loaned from Swedish *konst*	Nielsen 1932–38; Grundström 1946–54
SaL *kanna*	‘magic power’ Loaned from Norwegian *gand*	Lagerkrantz 1939

The *gandr* ritual has been discussed above (chapters 2 and 3), and the *kanna* concept is clearly linguistically related to this. Two other sets of words may also indicate a borrowing or interchange of religious practice between the Scandinavians and Sámis. The first, *tii’dâ* and its derivatives, is found around Arjeplog and Nesseby:

tii’da	‘magic act, sorcery, superstitious practice’	Lagerkrantz 1939
tii’dit, tii’distâllât	‘undertake magic acts, conjure’	Lagerkrantz 1939
tiidâstâllât	‘divine with the help of signs, practise superstition’	Grundström 1946–54

The second, *mânidit* and its derivatives, is of Norwegian origin and refers to the activities of a particular kind of sorcerer; it appears to have entered the Sámi languages via Finnish *manata*, ‘call forth, conjure up spirits’ (Rydving 1987: 197):

mânidæd’d’i	‘sorcerer, that through sorcery and magic acts drives away diseases etc.’	Lagerkrantz 1939
mânidit	‘affect through sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939
mânidæpmi	‘sorcery, magic chasing away’	Lagerkrantz 1939
mânidahtit	‘drive away through sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939
mânidahtihahti	‘possible to affect through sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939

As with the *noaidi* words, there also existed regional variation in the terms for other kinds of magic, as in these examples from Lyngen:

juoigâstit	‘bewitch’	Lagerkrantz 1939
pijjehakat	‘sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939
påjjidit	‘caused by sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939
tajka	‘sorcery, magic act’	Lagerkrantz 1939
tajkkastallat	‘conjure’	Lagerkrantz 1939

Other words refer to more specific magical acts, such as the following:

SaN *gæi’det*	‘(supernaturally) make invisible or cause to assume the appearance of something else (by bewitching the sight)	Nielsen 1932–38
	‘bewitch, make invisible through sorcery’	Lagerkrantz 1939
SaN *juovsâtit*	‘through a sorcery bring back, gather and let return to the possessor’	Lagerkrantz 1939;
	‘employ magic to make wild reindeer assemble and come to the place where one is lying asleep’	Nielsen 1932–38

The latter meaning of *juovsâtit* was applied to its use by *noaidi*, and we have no way of knowing how many of these terms refer to full ‘shamans’ or to the various other forms of magic-workers discussed above. Still further terms denote the activities of the assistants who participated in shamanic rituals, perhaps the Sámi equivalents to the women who sang the *varðlok(k)ur* in the *seiðr* performances of the Scandinavian *volur*:

SaTer *pālledit*	‘participate/co-operate in enchanting songs’	Itkonen 1958

Itkonen (1946: ch. 4) records how these assistants would repeat the ecstatic humming (*kikka*) of the *noaidi* and rhythmically beat the back of his neck (cf. Rydving 1987: 196).

The sights and sounds of trance

Several examples of highly specific terms are worth treatment in more detail, as they relate to particular practices and particularly the sounds and movements associated with them. A number of these refer to the activities of spirit helpers, such as the SaSk dialect word from Pasvik, *sahplelijjen-jotti* for ‘sorcerer that at the beginning of a journey sends out a mouse as a

reconnoitrer' (Rydving 1987: 194) – a clear description of such an animal familiar. In this instance, if the 'mouse' was killed, the one sending out its form would also die (it is interesting to compare this with the small animals into which the *benandanti* of the Friuli transformed themselves for similar purposes, discussed at greater length in chapter 6 below – see Ginzburg 1983). One of the most frequent categories of such words relates to the shamanic trance itself, and the aural and visual impression that it made on its witnesses. There are few early examples, but one in particular is of interest:

judakas, juraak	'a sorcerer that never chanted'	1767	Leem 1767: 486

The word *judakas* may be connected with SaN *jurrâ*, 'noise, hum, rumbling, crashing' (Nielsen 1932–38), in turn a loan-word from Finnish *jyry*, 'rumbling' (Toivonen 1955–81: 128). Among the postshamanistic terms we similarly find:

SaS *möwret*	'*noaidi*'s singing'	Lagerkrantz 1939
SaE *murret*	'growl, hum (sorcerer in his sleep)' Pasvik	Itkonen 1958
SaN *gievvot*	'behave as if one is in ecstasy, be wild or mad, be out of one's senses in emotion or hysteria'	Nielsen 1932–38; Grundström 1946–54; Laestadius 1959: 98
SaE *kikkat*	'play, sound, sing, hum, conjure'	Itkonen 1958
	Nuortijärvi, Kildin, Ter	

The SaS *möwret* may, like *judakas*, have a Finnish origin from *möyriä* 'roar, bellow'. The term is linked to use of the *miewra* (SaS for drum – Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 69), but Rydving (1987: 197) considers its eastern Sámi equivalent *murret* to be a loan-word from the Swedish *morra*. Both *gievvot* and *kikkat* may be of considerable age – Rydving agrees that they "were used during the time of the old religion" (1987: 195) – and the connection of the former with some form of religious ecstasy is uncontroversial. The verb *kikkat* is especially interesting, as it denotes a very specific sound in both SaE and SaC – that of the mating call of the male capercailzie bird, *Tetrao urogallus* (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 69). Besides giving a description of the noise of a shaman's singing, this may also refer to certain characteristics of the bird

itself, which is both blind and deaf during one part of its courtship ritual and therefore resembles the state of the *noaidi* in trance (Rydving 1987: 195). Genetz (1891: xliii) has proposed an alternative derivation from the Finnish *ky(y) kkiä*, meaning ‘kneel, crouch down’ and thereby describing the shaman’s posture during trance (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 69).

Rydving (1987: 197) has noted the great variety of regional differences in the postshamanistic terminologies, but suggests that this may solely reflect the conditions after the mission contacts. A similar range of terms is not apparent in, for example, the *noaidi* words from the shamanistic period proper. It is obvious that these questions cannot be considered in isolation, but must be examined in the context of Sámi-Scandinavian interaction in general. The first observation must be that Sámi ‘shamanism’ was not a static, orthodox entity, •but in fact exhibited: considerable regional variation in the precise form of •its expression changes in these forms of expression in the same area over •time We may also note the existence of: specialised types of practitioner •concentrating on one or more specific forms of work variation in the social roles, functions and abilities of male and female ritual specialists In other words, this repeats the pattern found among the Norse sorcerers and discussed in chapter 3.

‘Invisible power’ and secret sorcery

Another interesting and – as far as I am aware – unexplored aspect of Sámi ritual is a concept embodied in words such as SaL *noaidastâd’dât* and the earlier, related *nåitastallet*, both listed in the terminological section above. These refer to a person ‘giving the impression of knowing how to perform shamanistic rituals’, or in the later case, boasting of being able to do so. In the same area around Jokkmokk we also find a female equivalent, derived from *kuopas* (‘sorceress’ – Grundström 1946–54), in which *kuopastallat* was used in the sense of ‘to want to be regarded as skilled in the sorceress’s art’ (in Gällivare the same term meant simply ‘to conjure’; female sorcery is discussed in more detail below).

This not only gives a glimpse of the perceived social importance and reflected status of Sámi sorcerers, but an intriguing suggestion of the kind of power that could be claimed by an individual versed in such skills. Most importantly, we see here an indication that one could not always recognise who actually had such powers and who did not – an unavoidable conclusion in

the light of linguistic evidence that one could (presumably convincingly) claim to be a sorcerer when this was not in fact the case. This idea of outwardly 'invisible' power is important, and can be found in many societies which practice shamanism.

We may here recall the terminology of Norse male sorcery, and the words *falsspámaðr* and *villuspámaðr* meaning 'false prophecy-man', or 'man who prophecies falsely'. The concept of power residing in some secret form also occurs very often in association with the ability to shift shape, and is of obvious relevance to the connection that I would argue existed between the Scandinavian *volur* and the warriors of Óðinn, further explored in chapter 6 below.

Women and *noaidevuohta*

The role of women in the practice of Sámi traditional belief has long taxed historians of religion, and has often been associated with the crossing of sexual boundaries common in many shamanic traditions and discussed in chapter 3 above (cf. Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 17). In the light of modern gender studies this association could be considered misleading, as it confuses the complexities of gender-based identities with the more basic question of whether women performed 'shamanic' functions in Sámi society in their own right. There have also been suggestions that our view of Sámi belief has been influenced by the Christian focus on the 'male' religious sphere at the expense of the 'female'. On the one hand, this may have resulted in more information being recorded about male rituals, while on the other hand the practices and beliefs associated with Sámi women may have survived longer as they were subject to less active persecution by the missionaries.

In the context of the preceding arguments on female *seiðr*-practitioners in Viking-Age Scandinavian society, the following section will examine female religious figures among the Sámi in some detail, focusing in particular on the nature and form of the rituals these women performed.

Sources for female sorcery

We may firstly observe, without surprise, that the various roles played by women in the religious life of the Sámi seem to have changed over time. In

the earliest records there are no references to female *noaidi*, though there are a few sorcerous Sámi women in the Old Norse sources.

One of these has been noted by Strömbäck (1935: 198f), in ch. 25 of *Haralds saga hárfagra* in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. Here we read of a young Sámi woman called Snæfríðr who, upon being introduced to King Haraldr by her father, bewitches him into falling in love with her. The spell seems to take effect when the king takes hold simultaneously of her hand and a cup of mead that she offers him, and he feels a 'fiery heat' (*eldshiti*) go through him. Snæfríðr's father will not allow Haraldr to sleep with his daughter unless he first marries her, which the king then does, and thereafter loves her so passionately that he forgets all affairs of state. The king and Snæfríðr have four sons, after which she dies. Her body remains uncorrupted and her enchantment over Haraldr unbroken for three years, while the king continues to neglect his duties. Haraldr's retainers become desperate at the situation, and eventually one of them persuades him to change the robes that cover the body. When the drapes are disturbed Snæfríðr's corpse immediately begins to decompose, and even before a pyre can be built her body turns to ashes from which crawl large numbers of snakes and other creatures. The spell lifts and the king is restored to his senses.

The chapter forms a curious episode in *Haralds saga hárfagra*, but one which has echoes elsewhere in Old Norse literature (cf. Moe 1926: 168ff; the possible political overtones of the piece are discussed by Mundal 1996: 108f). There is little that can be said of Snæfríðr herself as the description of her abilities and actions is so vague, but we may perhaps compare her cup-offering gesture with the rituals discussed by Enright (1996). We may also note that her form of magic is clearly regarded as malicious in intent, and she is depicted almost entirely negatively by Snorri (in contrast to the image of Sámis in almost all saga literature, where they are generally positively described though not necessarily well-treated – see Mundal 1996). The portrayal of a Sámi woman with magical powers is nevertheless rare at this date, and Hultkrantz is dismissive of the saga as evidence that female *noaidi* existed so early. Interestingly for our purposes, he considers the passage to instead reflect the presence of such women in Viking-Age *Scandinavian* society – in other words, the *volur* (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 59). This will be further explored below, but we may note here that a connection to the

Scandinavian world is also made by the version that appears in *Ágrip*, which was probably Snorri's source for the tale. One of the four sons that Snæfríðr bears Haraldr is the same Rognvaldr réttilbeini discussed in chapter 3, who became a famous *seiðmaðr* in a Scandinavian context. The text makes it clear that his powers derived from his Sámi ancestry (Strömbäck 1935: 199).

Another variant of these stories depicts Sámi women fulfilling the functions of the Scandinavian *volur*. The type example here comes from *Vatnsdæla saga* (10), and is considered in more detail below, but there are numerous instances of Sámi women either advising Nordic people about sorcerous matters, or actively performing magic on their behalf (see Mundal 1996: 98f, 108f).

We first begin to read of female Sámi religious figures in the large corpus of records made in the post-medieval period by Christian missionaries and, later, by ethnographers. It is clear that by this time female practitioners of sorcery were in a small minority, but we can observe that traditions about such individuals were (and still are) found across the whole range of Sámi cultural contexts, including forest, maritime and mountain areas. It should also be stressed that none of the indigenous informants who recounted the stories about female sorcerers expressed any surprise that women should practice this form of magic. The implications of this for the early period, and by extension our comparisons with the Viking world, should be noted.

Several attempts have been made to reconstruct a wide range of terms used in both the post-medieval and later sources to describe different kinds of female sorcerers, building up a complex picture of their involvement in Sámi ritual at several levels (cf. Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 84; Lundmark 1987: 166; Rydving 1987), and a consideration of this terminology can serve as a useful starting point for our discussion. The words given here are cited in

similar fashion to the terms for male *noaidi* listed above:

Word	*Given meaning*	*Date*	*Source*
kwepkas	'woman versed in black art'	late 1670s	Lundius 1905: 8
gåbeskied	'witch'	1724	Thurenius 1910: 395
guaps, guape	'a woman who could chant and divine on the instruments her sex had access to'	1728, 1767	Skanke 1945: 200; Jessen 1767: 46
gapishjaedne	'female fortune-teller, sibyl, witch, sorceress'	1768	Leem 1768
qwopes	'sorceress, witch'	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 362
kuopeswuot	'sorcery, women's magic'	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 363
qwopastallet	'conjure, use magic'	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 363
qwopes akkakuts	'old witch'	1780	Lindahl & Öhrling 1780: 363

The words listed above are clearly related to the later SaL *kuopas* and *kuopaskui'na* (Grundström 1946–54), which in Rydving's postshamanistic phase is found as a specifically female alternative to *noaidi* in the Lule Sámi area. This accords well with Thurenius' description of the *gåbeskied* in Åsele, who he says enjoyed prestige and abilities exactly equal to that of a *noaidi*

(Lundmark 1987: 166), but not with Lundius who goes into some detail: “the women have no visible prophetic spirit which they can see before their eyes but they have other conjuring words by means of which a woman can do injury to her neighbour” (Lundius 1905: 8; Nesheim 1972: 22; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 84).

In both Gällivare and Jokkmokk the word *kuopas* was used for ‘sorceress’ (Grundström 1946–54), and while we do not know exactly what a *kuopas* was there have been several attempts to trace the origins of the word. Rydving (1987: 194) discusses Nesheim’s (1972: 22) suggestion of a link to the SaL *kuobbit* – ‘turn the eyes inside out, glare, stare angrily’ – and considers it “rather uncertain”. However, this conclusion overlooks a rather unusual parallel for this meaning in a spell cast by a woman called Spå-Ella (‘Ella the Seer’). Her activities were noted by Pettersson amongst others, and she lived around Kronakken where her father came from; he had been a powerful *noaidi*, and was skilled in the art of making drums (Pettersson 1944: 118). When Spå-Ella was in Åsele, she is recorded as responding to an annoying old woman by working magic “so that her eyes began to squeeze out of their sockets” (Lundmark 1987: 163) – a remarkably similar description to Nesheim’s *kuobbit*. The spell itself is taken up below in the section on women and violent magic, but here we may briefly wonder whether *kuopas* were a specific kind of female sorcerer, perhaps those who specialised in offensive spells along the same lines as the specialised male *noaidi* discussed above.

It has also been tentatively suggested that *kuopas* is Finno-Persian in origin, from the Mari *kuva* ‘old woman’ and the Udmurt *kuba* ‘mother-in-law’ (Rydving 1987: 194). If this derivation is accepted, as Rydving has argued there may be a connection with suffixes found in other areas. From Nuortijärvi for example, comes the Eastern Sámi word *noitahk’k* ‘old *noaidi*-woman’ (Itkonen 1958; Rydving 1987: 192) and from Malå and Arvidsjaur comes *nååidesgummoo* with the same meaning (Schlachter 1958); this is paralleled by Isaac Olsen’s mention of a *Noide Kalcko*, ‘old witch’ (Olsen 1910: 85). All these may be echoes of the *qwopes akkakuts* mentioned in the late 18th century by Lindahl & Öhrling as listed above. The important implication of a derivation for *kuopas* connected with old age is that this may have been a defining characteristic of the female sorcerer. This would contrast to the above-mentioned emphasis on youthfulness, ‘in possession of all one’s teeth’,

for the male *noaidi* (Rydving 1987: 196). We may compare this with the old age of the 'Angel of Death' that Ibn Fadlan witnessed on the Volga, and the age of the woman buried at Oseberg (see chapter 3 above).

Although the *kuopas* do seem to have been effectively female *noaidi* in the north, we find different words again further south, and here the terms are clearly linked to the primary *noaidi* concept. In the dialect of the southern Sámi (SaS) we find for example:

noåjdiesaakkaa	'sorceress, witch' Stensele	Hasselbrink 1981–85
noåjdiesgåmmaa	'female fortune-teller; sorceress' Frostviken	Hasselbrink 1981–85; Schlachter 1958

Such suffixes as the SaN *ak'ko* and SaS *gåmmaa* provide a clear parallel to the Finno-Persian derviation of *kuopas* given above, and are also found in personal names. Further specific examples of true female *noaidi* are considered in detail below.

These terms, with their various meanings and interpretations, portray a picture of women with a definite role in the religious world of the Sámi – fulfilling a range of functions as everything from figures of local superstition to fully-fledged 'shamans'. However, it is also clear from the sources that the participation of women in Sámi ritual was always bounded by taboos and oppositions, and to a greater extent than those affecting male *noaidi*. These restrictions can be divided into three main groups, and concern limitation of access to ritual spaces (sacrificial sites, offering places etc.), the regulation of what kinds of rituals women were allowed to perform, and in particular the relationship of Sámi women to the manufacture and use of the drum. In each of these instances, examples can be found which demonstrate the strict implementation of such restrictions, alongside other cases which by contrast show women actively participating in rituals of every kind – in some cases as *noaidi* who are said to possess skills more powerful than those of their male counterparts (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 84). A range of examples is considered below and in the subsequent sections, taking up specific cases from the ethnographic records.

Assistants and jojker-choirs

An important role in the *noaidi*'s rituals was played by their assistants, and these were most often women. Sometimes drawn from those observing the

rituals and sometimes arranged in a specific choir at the *noaidi*'s request, the singers would encircle the man as he went into trance. The number of assistants could vary, from a large group to three or four, or even a single woman. Olsen (1910: 45f) states that the women were instructed and trained by the *noaidi* for just this purpose (the full range of sources is summarised by Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 100ff).

Their role was to sing the *jojk* and *luohti* songs, a central aspect of Sámi life that in some ways was a symbol for their whole shamanic world-view. We shall examine them in more detail below, but here we can note that their purpose in the shamanic ritual was to remind the *noaidi* of his task and also to guide him back from the other world to this one (Kildal 1945: 140). Other writers suggested that without the singing the *noaidi* would not survive, and that it formed a kind of lifeline back to his body (Schefferus 1956: 172). It was also recorded that the assistants were a kind of watchmen who would guard the shaman's body until the soul returned (Niurenius 1973: 21f).

In other sources it is the singing which wakes up the *noaidi*, performed by a group of women, a single virgin or even another *noaidi* (Bäckman & Hultktrantz 1978: 101). Both the Yukaghirs (Jochelson 1926: 196–9) and the Evenki (Anisimov 1963: 102f) had specialists whose responsibility it was to rouse the shaman from trance (cf. Tolley 1995a: 60), and here again we see a clear circumpolar context for the Sámi rituals. Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1978: 101) suggest that these assistants must also have entered trance, for how else could they follow the path of the *noaidi*'s soul in order to call him home?

In the training of the singers and the role of a circle of chanting women, a number of parallels are immediately evident with the *varðlok(k)ur* of the Norse. The differences are also clear, particularly in the function of the songs which among the Sámi concern the *noaidi* whereas among the Norse relate to the spirits.

Women, ritual and drum-magic

Several references are made in the later sources to restrictions on women's access to sacred spaces. In his work on Sámi offering sites, Mebius (1968: 78) has noted that these places were "as a rule a forbidden area for women", and that an expiatory sacrifice was necessary if this law was broken (see also Lundmark 1987: 164f). According to Leem (1767: 444), these rules applied

even if merely a piece of woman's clothing was taken within the bounds of an offering site. Even stronger taboos are recorded by Högström (1747: 194) who relates that women were not allowed to cross the path of a man on his way to make an offering – a stipulation similar to that relating to drums (see below). Rheen (1897: 34, 37) adds that such restrictions applied anywhere, even if an offering was to be made outside the woman's own *kåta*.

Another more specific source, notes made by Henric Forbus, records that "*Skola qwinfolken ei töras komma när Passevara, the helige bergen ¼ Mil, ei eller nånten til offerplatsen, utan om de wilja offra, måste det skje gjenom en förfaren Man i konsten*" – 'womenfolk may not come within 1½ miles of Passevara, the holy mountain, and neither may they approach the place of sacrifice, but if they wish to make a sacrifice, this must be done through a man versed in the art' (Forbus 1910a: 36; Lundmark 1987: 164f). Similarly, in Skanke's description written *c.*1731, he states that the *guaps* were not allowed to make sacrifices, this being an activity reserved for men. However, he does add that women were permitted to attend 'Noide-samlinger', '*noaidi* gatherings', and to *jojk* at such meetings (Skanke 1945: 200). This pattern can be seen to have been the norm in early Sámi society, but by the post-medieval period we find a number of women who were clearly well used to performing rituals in these holy places.

The most famous of these individuals, and perhaps the most well-known of all female Sámi shamans, was Rijkuo-Maja of Arvidsjaur (*c.*1660–1757), about whom stories are still in active circulation (Lundmark 1977, 1987: 158; Mebius 1972). She was a woman of considerable wealth, her prosperity deriving from ownership of an immense reindeer herd which she was said to control through her abilities as a *noaidi.* Some sources mention that her husband had been a *noaidi*, and that she took over his power after he died (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 85). However, even if her sorcerous activities post-dated her husband's death, Rijkuo-Maja's direct association with sacred sites can be traced even before this time, and in fact she seems to have always practiced the same broad range of rituals at such places as a male *noaidi*. Interestingly, Lundmark (1977: 63) considers her to have been a *guaps*, which would imply that *noaidi* and *guaps* were simply respectively male and female signifiers for 'shaman', which does not take account of the slightly different nature of the *guaps*' power, as discussed above.

Tradition suggests that she was a devotee of the thunder god, to whom she sacrificed specially-chosen reindeer-bulls by burying them alive (a *tjekku*-sacrifice) at a marshy place called Åskmyren or 'thunder-bog' (Lundmark 1987: 159; the reindeer were marked for sacrifice by cuts to the ear – Olsen 1910: 12, 34 – just as modern herders denote ownership of their animals today). At this bog she also made sacrifices on *luovveh* platforms (ULMA 4373a: 53), and after her death when her land passed into other ownership, it was known as the 'thunder-mark' (NM 1032). She also worshipped and sacrificed together with her husband at a stone *seite* by Lake Mausjaur (Kolmodin 1914: 27; pictured in Manker 1957, pl. 233), in which she is recorded as making offerings of silver objects (Lundmark 1977: 64). These details are corroborated in a number of other sources (Solander 1910: 23; Högström 1747: 188; see also Lundmark 1987: 164).

The complex relationship between Sámi women and sacred space was also reflected in their associations with the drum, clearly a primary feature of Sámi operative ritual. Once again, information on the relationship of women to the use of these objects is complex and in parts contradictory. In a number of accounts it is stated very clearly that women were forbidden to use or even touch drums, and in an extreme example not even allowed to cross the path over which a drum had travelled (Rheen 1897: 18, 35; Thurenius 1910: 395; Schefferus 1956: 166).

A similar distinction is found in the account of an old Sámi man who in 1691 was brought before the local assizes in Vadsø accused of working drum magic (Knag 1903: 70f; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 84). It is of intrinsic interest that he claimed to have learned his craft from his mother, who he said was a *noaidi*, but we may also note that he took care to stress that despite this he had *made* the drum himself. Another account concerns the relationship of women to the materials set aside for the manufacture of drums, where we read of similar taboos. When a certain Jon Jonasson of Hävlingen reserved the hide of a calf, *laeihpen miesie*, for the skin of a drum he decreed at the same time that "no woman was allowed to touch it" (Demant-Hatt 1928: 54).

However, set against this picture are a number of exceptions, some of which seem to be internally contradictory. For example, in the same passage where Thurenius notes the restrictions on women's use of drums, he goes on to say that the *gåbeskied* – the 'female *noaidi*' discussed above – could

perform their magic “with or without the above-named instruments [*i.e.* drums]” (Thurenius 1910: 395). It is unclear whether this simply contradicts his earlier assertion, or whether the *gåbeskied* were not simply *noaidi* of the opposite sex but actually represented another concept entirely, equal but different – this is a typical problem in the study of traditional Sámi religion.

Most interesting are the instances of very powerful female *noaidi* actively using drums. Into this category come both Rijkuo-Maja and another well-known figure, Silbogåmmoe, whose given name was Anna Greta Matsdotter (1794–1870). Gustaf Hallström was told of her in 1909, when it was remembered that she was “famous for magic and could use the drum” (Hallström 1910: 37), and like Rijkuo-Maja it seems that she was married to a man who was himself a *noaidi* (NM 1032). Her power was at least in part hereditary, for one of her sons also became a sorcerer and was considered to have obtained his abilities from his mother (see the discussion of Spå-Nila below). In the context of the Scandinavian *volur* it is interesting to examine in more detail the descriptions of the rituals that these women performed and the associated paraphernalia that went with them.

Rijkuo-Maja is recorded as having stood in the shallows of a lake to work magic for producing a thunder storm, presumably linked to her patron and in this case for the purpose of dousing a fire which threatened the reindeer grazing pastures. Two items of her equipment are of special interest here. She firstly used a head-covering (see chapter 3) of some kind, mentioned in some sources as a *lijnie* or veil (ULMA 4373a: 48) and in others as a *skudnjaa*, a ‘sack-like rug of the sort one slept in’ (LA1; Lundmark 1987: 160). Ramselius (1920: 53) goes into more detail about what he calls this *offerslöja*, ‘sacrificial veil’, and says that it was made of reindeer-calfskin and covered her whole face. This appears to have been something similar to what Leem described in the apparel of women who were to be present when a *noaidi* went into trance, when they were dressed in their best clothes “with a linen hood on their heads” (Leem 1767: 476; cf. Lundmark 1987: 167); we may also compare this with the *rab’da* headress cloth discussed by Sommarström (1965: 125; 1987: 217). Rijkuo-Maja’s storm ritual involved not only drumming but splashing the lake water and whistling. Ramselius (1920: 54) elaborates on this and mentions the other item of interest to us here, when he writes that while whistling she struck the water three times with “her stick with brass

trimmings". This latter object sounds remarkably similar to the *volva*'s staff discussed in the preceding chapter. Ramselius (1920: 53) also describes another drum ritual of Rijkuo-Maja's, and relates how she collected her reindeer herd each morning by kneeling on the ground, her face covered with the calfskin veil, and drumming until the animals were assembled.

Silbo-gåmmoe's drum seems to have been of an unusual kind, a point which is important as it supports the suggestion that female sorcerers among the Sámi were not entirely the same as their male counterparts. Her drum was richly decorated with silver objects, probably rings (Hallström 1910: 35), and it was from this that she derived her nickname, Silbo-gåmmoe literally meaning 'silver-wife' (Lundmark 1987: 161). She may have inherited this drum from her father Mats Nilsson Druri of Lövfjäll, who is mentioned as always carrying it near him so as to be able to take its council at any time. He even placed it for this reason in the first *ackja* (sled) when travelling – an unusual thing to do as Lundmark notes (1987: 161), because the instruments should normally travel in the last sleigh "so nothing unclean would cross the path of the magic drum" (Hallström 1910: 36; Pettersson 1979: 77, 301). Hallström was told that Silbo-gåmmoe's drum, or at least that which came from her household, was to be found "at Skansen", in other words what is now the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, but no trace of it can be found there (Hallström 1910: 37; Lundmark 1987: 161). There are no exact descriptions of her drum rituals, but Isak Rydberg's father had seen her lying in trance beside her drum with foam at her mouth; Manker was later told a similar story (1957: 245) which was recorded on tape (DAUM Gr. 390B).

There are several other more circumstantial descriptions of women associated with drums. Demant-Hatt (1928: 54) and Lundmark (1987: 165) both take up the case of a woman born around 1850 at Storvallen in Härjedalen, who reported that her father's foster-mother Sara Larsson "had a magic drum with her when she moved down here to Härjedalen from the north, from Frostviken". The drum was kept for some time in a shed, before Sara buried it "where it can't get in anyone's way". We also find a linguistic link between women and drums, with the SaU word *guaps-gåb'dee* (Schlachter 1958) – this appears to be an alternative word for the drum itself, but is formed as a compound of the *kuopas/guaps* terms for female sorcerers discussed above.

Female diviners and healers in Sámi society

We have already seen how even in the early sources there is mention of women practicing the arts of divining the future and clairvoyance, often through the use of specific tools such as knives, axes and especially belts (*e.g.* Lundius 1905: 8; Thurenius 1910: 396; Solander 1910: 24; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 59). Thomas von Westen mentions these in a letter from 1723 when he relates how soothsaying was done "belted" (von Westen 1910: 2). Solander also records how Sámi women prayed to *Passevare-Ollmaj*, the 'holy men of the mountain': *så hänger hon upp sitt bälte, och därigenom frågar*, 'she hangs up her belt, and asks through it' (Solander 1910: 24; Lundmark 1987: 167). The priest Henric Forbus seems to be describing something similar in 1727, when he tells how women would sing to the belts *så länge at instrumentet blir rörligt*, "until the instrument [*i.e.* the belt] begins to move" (Forbus 1910a: 34) – the belt presumably having been hung up first. This seems to have been particularly a southern phenomenon, but men too used belts for this purpose, as we see in the description of one of Silbo-gåmmoe's sons who was also a *noaidi*. This man, Spå-Nila or 'Nila the Seer' (1822–99, also known as Stor-Nila, 'Great-Nila'), inherited his mother's scarf of squirrel tails, which he used in his own ritual performances. We read that he carried the scarf in his belt, and let one end drag on the floor as "a sign that he intended to practise divination" (ULMA 5585: 64; see Lundmark 1977: 61–2 and 1991 for a full biography of Spå-Nila).

An alternative method of divination was to use *aqvavit* or *snaps*, the Scandinavian strong liquor, especially to find out the identity of a thief. During his attempts to convert the Sámi, Henric Forbus drew up a detailed list of 72 questions that he routinely put to the people he encountered in an effort to discover if they held allegiance to the old religion; of these questions, number 45 reads *Har tu sedt i Bräntwin hwem som stulit hade?*, 'have you seen in the aqvavit who has stolen?' (Forbus 1910b: 73) This much-neglected document incidentally forms one of the most depressing witnesses as to the true character of the Lappland missions, as one can clearly perceive behind the questions the progressively increasing mental and corporal pressure being brought to bear on the subject – the list is a testament to the insidious process by which the traditional knowledge so deeply embedded in the Sámi psyche was deliberately undermined and dismantled.

Healing was another ability of female Sámi shamans and also of Thurenius' *gåbeskied*, who could furthermore affect the weather (1910: 395), and there are several examples of women who used their skills for this purpose. One such was Lapp-Stina, who cured several cases of sickness in Ångermanland where she lived as a *sockenlapp*. Her powers were attested to by several priests – one of whom had his sight restored by her – in full knowledge of the conflict that their testimony created with their own religious beliefs (Laestadius 1959: 96). Lapp-Stina's explanation for her curative skills was that she had learned them from her 'godparent', a 'woman of the underworld' (Laestadius 1959: 96) who she said had been present at her christening. The same source records that she would mentally converse with the spirit woman before beginning to effect a cure. The tradition of female healers has been among the most persistent into modern times, and continues today in northern Norway where its practitioners, considered to be 'non-Christian', are known as *Mir'ku-ákku* (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 89).

Women also assisted male *noaidi* in healing rituals, as in the above-mentioned case of the two described by Leem (1767: 476) who attended a curing ritual dressed in their finest clothes, with linen hoods over their heads but without their belts. These women, called *Sjarak*, were accompanied by an adolescent girl whose role in the ritual is unclear. The mortal female participants seem to have been reflected in the 'invisible assembly' (*usynlige forsamling*) of spirits and *noaaide-gadze* who responded to the sorcerer's summons, a gathering of beings which was presided over by Aarja. Among this assembly were two spirit-women whom Leem describes as being those "*som benævnte Aarja havde med sig*", "whom the aforesaid Aarja had with her" (1767: 476). These women were called *Rudok*, and are discussed in greater depth by Myrhaug (1997: 71ff).

Animals and the natural world

As with other areas of Sámi religious behaviour, the relationship between women and animals – including their spiritual forms – was also full of contradictions. These are exemplified once again by Rijkuo-Maja. According to Bränström's ethnographical notes made in Arvidsjaur in 1931 (ULMA 4373a: 53) she employed only one shepherd despite the size of the herd, and could pick out individual deer at great distance; there are other traditions recording that "she 'knew' her reindeer in a special way" (Lundmark 1987:

158). Several records show that this relationship was widely believed to have continued after her death. When Rijkuo-Maja's family disobeyed her wishes for a non-Christian burial, within a few years the reindeer herd had either scattered irretrievably or been killed in drift ice – as she had herself prophesied if her instructions were not heeded (ULMA 4373a: 49; NM 573, 638, 641). Interestingly, one informant also mentions that she did not need dogs because the wolves were in her service (Lundmark 1987: 159) – a strange suggestion given the traditional Sámi antipathy to these animals (cf. Larsson 1996 & 1998). She seems also to have adopted an unusual role in relation to the other animals in her home tract, placing both wild creatures and edible birds "under her protection". If hunters nevertheless killed animals in the area against her wishes, she compelled them to sacrifice their prey before a great pine tree, with a human face carved in its bark (ULMA 4373a: 107).

Other animals are also mentioned in association with female Sámi sorcerers, as in the case of Silbo-gåmmoe who repaid a stranger's gift of meat by apparently conferring upon her some kind of animal spirit-guide in the form of a white dog, who "will go before you all the time" (NM 1032). We may note that the recipient of the spirit-dog, Brita Maria Nilsson of Grundträsk, had very little idea of what Silbogåmmoe was talking about but nevertheless interpreted it as something positive!

What links all these ideas is the notion of shamanic helping spirits, which often took animal form. Although as we have seen Lundius (1905) rejected the idea that Sámi women could have such helpers due to their 'debilitating weaknesses of distinct kinds', there are clear indications that this did not necessarily reflect the reality of Sámi religion; we may also speculate that Lundius' opinions were influenced more by his own cultural views on women than by information he received from the Sámi. Among the early sources, Leem is perhaps the most specific when he relates how the *Trold-Qvinder* described above have worked magic "i Svaners, Ravnes, Falkes, Giæsses, Anders, Maagers, Sælhundes, Marsviins, Hvalfiskes, samt andre Fugles, firefodte Dyrs og Fisekes Gestalt", that is 'in the form of swans, ravens, falcons, geese, ducks, seagulls, seals, dolphins, whales and other four-footed creatures and fishes' (Leem 1767: 453–4).

Like the women described by Leem, Rijkuo-Maja seems to have been especially associated with birds, with the raven, eagle and bench-jay being

specifically noted as being among the creatures that she ‘protected’ in her reindeer pasture. The bench-jay reappears as part of the name of another *guaps* from Arvidsjaur, Guoksag-gummuo, and Lundmark considers these birds to represent helping spirits of the theriomorphic kind (1987: 166; her habits are further described in Ruong 1944: 125).

Like Rijkuo-Maja, Guoksag-gummuo also made sacrifices and worshipped pine-trees with anthropomorphic features carved on them (Manker 1957: 225), though this was not a custom specific to female sorcerers. Manker’s survey of cult sites lists several examples of such trees, including pines at Maskaure (*ibid*: 225), Tomholmen near Luleå’s Gammelstad (*ibid*: 187, pl. 154–5), a very large example at the *Avgudahällan* or ‘worship-rock’ by Kaskajaure (*ibid*: 213, pl. 205), Viktorp in Meselefors and Råseleforsen in southern Vilhelmina (*ibid*: 271–3, pl. 294– 7) and Offerdal in Jämtland (*ibid*: 289). Offerings were also made to pines which had not been altered by carving, as for example the sacred trees at Seitejaure (Manker 1957: 224) and the *uhriaikki* pine tree at Markkina in Enontekiö, Finland (Itkonen 1946: 48; Manker 1957: 99f, pl. 4–5).

These trees may have had a connection to helping spirits in addition to being worshipped in their own right, or as expressions of the mystical power of certain forms of topography – an example being the pine at Markkina mentioned above, which was situated on a promontory at the confluence of two watercourses, a so-called *skaite* place (Johansson 1941: 61; Manker 1957: 100). This particular site is a good illustration of the special relationship that some Sámi sorcerers – though perhaps not all – seem to have had with individual trees as the residence of their helping spirits. Markkina was the scene of the resolution of a famous spirit duel between the two male *noaidi* Kielahis-Niilu and Nahkul, related by Johansson (1941: 61ff), Manker (1957: 100) and Lundmark (1977: 59). A long-running feud between the two men resulted in Nahkul attacking his enemy with the assistance of his helping spirits, while Niilu was on his way to the market at Markkina. Witnesses related that Niilu came driving his sled at full speed into the settlement, dripping with sweat and swinging his arms as if warding off invisible things flying about him in the air, and then ran as fast as he could to the pine tree on the hill. The tree was at that time very young, and Niilu is reported as shouting during his run to the tree, “Bara jag hinner till min lilla tall, så klarar jag mig

nog", 'if I can just make it to my little pine, I'll be alright'. Upon embracing the tree he relaxed and the attack upon him ceased. Manker (1957: 100) records how on other occasions Niilu himself was seen with his own helping spirits who seem to have resided in the tree, once pulling his sled in the form of a wolf and a second time as an invisible force making the sled appear to move by itself. His good fortune was attributed to a positive relationship with the dead lying in the churchyard which was situated on the hill below the sacred pine.

Such trees appear in other shamanic cultures, sometimes as the place of birth of the shaman and often as the tree from which the drum is carved, thus forming the personal link between the shaman and his or her vehicle for spirit journeys. In Sámi culture, the 'drum tree' was often one that had been struck by lightning (cf. Lundmark 1977: 59, and the story of Ol Sjulsson's cutting of drum-wood related by Pettersson 1979: 77f). In the specific context of women and Sámi religion, both Lundmark (1987: 167) and Eliade (1989: 69) have noted the similarities that the combination of birds and sacred trees – as in the case of Rijkuo-Maja – bears to Buryat myths of the origins of female shamanism. The tradition of such carved faces may also have a parallel in a similar custom in the Eastern Woodlands of North America, in the same area as some of the most complex concepts of the Owner of the Animals mentioned above. Here Fenton (1987: 206–9) has noted the Iroquois tradition of carving a False Face on living trees, within the context of the Society of Faces (McElwain 1987 discusses further parallels between Iroquois and Sámi belief; cf. Brown 1997).

The nature of Rijkuo-Maja's relationship to the animals of her territory also raises other intriguing possibilities for the interpretation of female sorcery among the Sámi – and by extension its links with the Scandinavian *volur* – as her actions have parallels with the functions of the Rulers discussed above.

The female noaidi?

Two main approaches have been adopted to the female *noaidi* and similar figures in the later sources. Bäckman suggests that people such as Rijkuo-Maja cannot be considered true 'shamans' as they operated on an individual basis outside the context of a community. Such 'shamanism', she argues, had no religious basis, attracted no believers, and functioned purely for divination (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 84–5). In such circumstances, which resemble

Rydving's definition of a 'postshamanistic' phase, women may have found it possible to "perform in new roles which were previously taboo to them" (Lundmark 1987: 167). However, this does not take into account the wide range of functions that these women performed. We have seen above examples of not only divination but also healing and drum rituals – magical violence is considered below – together with the same kinds of sacrificial behaviour and possession of spirit helpers as characterise the male *noaidi*. The second of the two approaches would therefore seem the most likely interpretation, in Lundmark's words that "they are possibly latter-day exponents of an even earlier, extant shamanism with female characteristics in the Saami area" (1987: 167f).

Interestingly, Lundmark draws the ultimate support for his argument on the existence of female Sámi 'shamans' from the *volur* of the Viking-Age Scandinavians, whose existence he accepts without question (Lundmark 1987: 168; see also Lundmark 1977: 62 for a more developed appraisal).

Enough evidence has been presented here – at deliberate length in view of the fact that the Sámis were the Viking-Age Scandinavians' co-habitants of the peninsula – to suggest that female sorcery was a major element of Sámi religion in the post-medieval period, and that a good case can be made for this situation being a continuation of a long-standing tradition. We have also seen how specialists in Sámi religion consider the existence of the *volur* as female practitioners of shamanistic rituals to be so secure among the Scandinavian societies as to be a valuable support for discussions of such figures in the Sámi area.

The rituals of *noaidevuohta*

Perhaps the most important aspect to note about the Sámi complex of sorcery, this *noaidevuohta,* was the deep division of all its rituals along lines of gender. As we have seen, there were specific gods for men and women, and different spirits too. The same is true of the rituals of the *noaidi*, and it is not going too far to talk of a 'double religion', a dual scheme reflecting a kind of submerged conflict between the sexes.

This is not the place for an extensive discussion of the Sámi shamanic rituals, which have attracted a considerable literature. In addition to the general works listed above, the reader is directed to Clive Tolley's 1994

analysis of the first known description of a *noaidi*'s performance in the *Historia Norvegiae*, Hans Mebius' work on sacrificial rituals (1968, 1972) and the very useful overview in Bäckman & Hultkrantz (1978: 62–90). Here we shall instead draw out key themes and functional arenas.

Håkan Rydving has isolated four aspects of Sámi rituals, all inter-related and interdependent, as being of primary importance when interpreting their •••meaning: the spatial location of the ritual the time when it is performed the constructions of sex or gender with which the ritual and/or its performer(s) •are encoded the economic context of the ritual, *i.e.* what it relates to in the wider social sphere Their purpose could vary, with different ceremonies for different kinds of objectives. Again, most of our data comes from the South Sámi area. Some of these rituals were *rites de passage*, such as the important process of name-giving, though we know few details of the ceremonies performed for other life-stages such as puberty and, not least, the burial of the dead.

Other rituals were linked to calendrical or seasonal observations, such as the bear ceremonies in May, the offerings of lichen and porridge to the sun at midsummer, and the great autumn sacrifices to the highest god. In the holy month approximating to November, called *bassemánnu* in SaN, major offerings were made to all the gods and especially to the moon. These sacrifices set the pattern for the year, divided into 13 months and eight seasons, and formed around the interaction between the natural environment, nutritional sources and the movements of the reindeer. The whole system also moved on a spatial axis, according to the terrain through which the herds travelled and the relative position of the treeline.

One of the main ritual territories of the *noaidi* concerned situations of crisis. These could include times of difficult weather such as storms, or a failed hunt, but also more domestic circumstances such as outbreaks of severe illness or the necessity to change a person's name. The rites of hunting and divination were also constants of the *noaidi*'s calling.

The drums were used for divination and clairvoyance, to predict the outcome of hunting expeditions, to cure the sick and as a first step in negotiations with the spirits. The *exact* function of the drum is unclear, and it is possible that different types were used in different ways, in different places, at different times. Lousie Bäckman has recently speculated in oral

presentations, though not so far in print, that for the most powerful sorcery the drum was not beaten at all, but waved in the air. This puzzling behaviour accords with several early ethnographies, and it may be that the drum served as a symbol of transport more than an aid to attaining an altered state of consciousness. It is interesting that the *Historia Norvegiae*'s account of a Sámi séance clearly mentions a drum, but it is merely carried by the *noaidi* as he leaps about. It is decorated with images of transportation (an oared ship, bridled deer, snow-shoes) and these are expressly described as being the means whereby the spirits travel on the *noaidi*'s errands (cf. Tolley 1994: 136f).

These spirits were crucial, functioning both as ritual tutors, guardians and assistants. Each *noaidi* had his own relationship with the individual spirits, and the two were bound together in various forms of symbiosis.

Following Bäckman and Hultkrantz, Tolley (1994: 139f) has isolated the main elements in the Sámi shamanic séance based on a composite of all the early descriptions. Having prepared for his rituals by fasting, the *noaidi* takes various forms of intoxicating drink. The drum is brought into the *kåta* through the sacred rear door, and sometimes warmed by the fire to prepare its skin. The *noaidi*'s dress is considered below, but having arranged his attire the *noaidi* begins to beat on the drum or wave it around. As we have seen, he is accompanied by female singers, and occasionally men seem to have added a lower tone to the *jojk*. Sometimes the singers narrate the path that the *noaidi* will follow through the spirit realms. The *noaidi* often runs about the *kåta*, sometimes picking up hot coals or cutting himself without effect. His body has become 'hard' and sometimes his skin noticeably darkens, presumably with diffused blood.

After a period of drumming the *noaidi* may begin to foam at the mouth, fall to his knees and begin a high-pitched *jojk*. He collapses and apparently cease to breathe. The assistants watch over his prone body and do not cease their chanting. The trance seems to have lasted between thirty and sixty minutes, after which the *noaidi*'s breathing slowly returns to normal and he regains consciousness (see Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 92–106 for a full review of Sámi trance states). The *jojk* singing increases in tempo as the *noaidi* comes back, guiding him home. His awakening may be at the call of a single girl.

The *noaidi* raises himself and begins to softly beat his drum. At this point he sits in reflection for some time, recovering his strength, before narrating the course of his journey and experiences to the onlookers. In some of the accounts, the *noaidi* also makes sexual allusions to the young woman who brought him back from trance, making copulating gestures to her and displaying his genitals.

The role of jojk

A major part of Sámi ritual, intimately connected to the 'soul', was the concept of the *jojk* (pronounced 'yoik'). This unique form of semi-ritualised singing was central to the world of *noaidevuohta* and today still forms a fundamental part of Sámi life (Arnberg *et al.* 1997).

The concept of performance was crucial to the meaning of *jojk*, which often functioned as a mnemonic to recall things considered to be important in a non-literate society. There were *jojks* to bring to mind places, people, animals and objects, and also events that brought these things together. Partly *ad hoc* compositions in a 'poetry of the moment', *jojk* also worked within a constant tradition of basic form. There was a broad terminology of *jojk* which included both worded and wordless forms. In some senses it is possible to speak of a philosophy of *jojk* in Sámi culture, embracing its importance for religion and its key role in understanding the world-view of these people.

The *jojk* and a variant of special songs called *luohti* were also constant features in the rituals of the *noaidi*, and provided the background to all the practices of *noaidevuohta*. They were the means of communication with the other world, the language of trance and in some ways a rhythm of life itself. One of the things that characterised the emptiness of the world of the dead was the absence of *jojk* there. This was one of the contexts in which the *jojk* was important, in terms of remembrance of the dead and the maintenance of contact with them through the medium of the song.

Every person also had their own *jojk*, conferred by their relatives during childhood, and this individual melody could be used in conversation in place of a name. These name-*jojks* also found their way into the larger *jojk* compositions with a semi-narrative function. In this sense *jojk* was a means of communicating between people who knew one another well, and who would understand the references in the sounds (Kuoljok & Westman 1998).

The material culture of noaidevuohta

The noaidi's dress

Unlike most of the circumpolar traditions, we know little of the *noaidi*'s dress. Few early authors make any mention of special clothes, and in fact where the preparations are referred to the descriptions differ widely.

Thurenius (1910: 396) says that the *noaidi* dressed in his best clothes and was carefully turned out, having combed his hair and taken a bath. Leem (1767: 477) records that the *noaidi* removed his hat and loosened his belt and shoes. Olsen (1910: 43ff) mentions two different actions of the *noaidi*, both highly specific. On one occasion he turns his clothes inside out and wears them backwards, while on another he performs his rituals naked.

It is possible that colour symbolism may have played a part in the *noaidi*'s clothing. Red was often associated with magic and sacrifice, while white represented the sun and black stood for the dead.

Drums, drum-hammers and pointers

Among the most fundamental items of equipment in the shamanic repertoire – particularly in the popular imagination – are drums. They are found in most parts of the circumpolar region, especially in Siberia, though they are by no means universal even there. In the Sámi *noaidevuohta* there is no doubt that the drum was vital.

The primary requisite of the *noaidi*, there were once many hundreds, if not thousands, of these drums. Today less than eighty examples from the post-medieval period survive, scattered throughout Scandinavia and the anthropological collections of the world. Catalogued and described by Ernst Manker (1938, 1950), the drums occur in several different forms with discrete distributions. The drums were constructed in two basic types – frame-drums (SaL *gievrie*; Fig. 4.3) in the south, and bowl-drums (SaL *goabdes*, SaN *meavrresgárri*; Fig. 4.4) in the north. A full guide to these objects, their design and iconography may be found in the four synthetic publications to have appeared since Manker's great work (Kjellström & Rydving 1988; Ahlbäck & Bergman 1991; Westman & Utsi 1999; Westman 2000).



Fig. 4.3 A Sámi shamanic drum of the frame-type, with its painted skin full of images used in the noaidi*'s performance; a drum hammer rests on the surface (photo by Åge Hojem, courtesy of NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet).*

Within the images painted on the surfaces of the drum-skin are eight patterns of compositional variation, hinting at changing traditions and functions within Sámi ritual practice. The design scheme of the drums is too complex for a full discussion here and has been treated extensively by Manker and others, but we can note that the Sámi themselves tended when questioned to emphasise hunting themes in interpreting the images, whereas scholars have preferred to concentrate on mythological explanations; the truth probably lies somewhere in between (Fig. 4.5).

Both Niurenius and Steuchius (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 73f) noted that different kinds of drums were used for different purposes. One, which was called by the Swedish name of *wåntrumma*, 'hope- or expectation-drum', was used for divination and prediction, and for the provision of good fortune. Importantly, there seem to have been few restrictions as to who could use this kind of instrument. The second form of drum was reserved for the *noaidi*, and

called a *spåtrumma*, ‘prediction-drum’, by the Swedes. Oddly considering its name (which we should remember was the missionaries’ coinage, not the Sámis’), this type was perceived as a weapon, a *skadetrumma* or ‘damage-drum’ with which the *noaidi* could cause injury and harm. Both types of drum were decorated, but differently according to the missionaries. We do not know how these recorded drum types and design schemes relate to the examples that survive.



Fig. 4.4 A Sámi shamanic drum of the bowl-type, probably from Lule Lappmark (photo courtesy of Nordic Museum, Stockholm).



Fig. 4.5 The design scheme of the drum shown in Fig. 4.4. (photo courtesy of Nordic Museum, Stockholm).

Some accounts suggest that the drums were thought to speak, their booming rhythms reflecting the voices of the spirits (Kildal 1945: 137). These

beings were first summoned and then sent into the drums, where the *noaidi* would converse with them.

The drum was held horizontal in the left hand, and beaten in a lateral motion with a hammer, often of bone or antler with a double head (SaN *ballem* or *viæzer*, SaS *ståwro* or *viedtjere*). Several examples of these hammers have been found, primarily in Norway, and others are known from excavated medieval contexts far older than the earliest surviving drums. One of these, from Nordset in Øvre Rendal, Opland, is dated by its carved decoration to the period 1000–1200 (Gjessing 1945; Manker 1950: 442; Zachrisson 1991b: 86ff), and has fragments of Ringerike stryle ornament that may indicate some degree of hybridity – including of use? – with the Norse inhabitants of the region (Bergstøl 2008a: 98ff; cf. Pareli 1991; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 107; Fig. 4.6).

A small pointer called an *árpa*, SaN for ‘frog’ (SaS *veike*; Fig. 4.7), was placed on the drum-skin, the vibrations of which would make it jump about across the design of painted images, hence its name. Investigations of the nodal patterns of the drums indicate the *árpa* would have moved strangely, sometimes stopping suddenly, sometimes jumping quite high above the drum. The sequential movement of the pointer would trace out a path from one image to another, the meaning of which would be interpreted by the *noaidi*. Again, several examples of these pointers are known, often of brass, horn or bone, sometimes made of reused jewellery, pieces of metal and so on. Some of these pointers had metal chains and silver or brass ‘jingles’ hanging from them (SaS *baja*).



Fig. 4.6 A Sámi drum hammer from Nordset in Rendalen, Norway, dated 1000–1200 with decoration that mixes Sámi styles with Norse Ringerike ornament (photo by Thorguds, Creative Commons).

The rear of the drum was also festooned with objects, serving various kinds of amuletic and protective functions (Fig. 4.8). As we have seen, silver and iron nails could be attached for each bear-hunt that the drum had effected,

and the penis bones of bears are also found hanging on the drum handles as especially powerful charms. Other objects found on the reverse of drums include coils of tin thread, brass rings, bear claws, the teeth of bears and beavers, and an array of coloured cloths.

The extent to which use of the drum was confined to the *noaidi* is problematic, as there are numerous documents relating that drums were found in at least half of Sámi households or even more (cf. Pettersson 1979: 77), especially in the southern area of Sápmi. They may have been used differently in different areas, and their use may also have changed over time. Leem (1767: 467), amongst others, also notes that the Sámi sometimes employed other objects to maintain a beat, such as barrel-lids and painted bowls – we can think here of the previous chapter's discussion concerning the nature of the mysterious *vétt* in Norse sorcery.

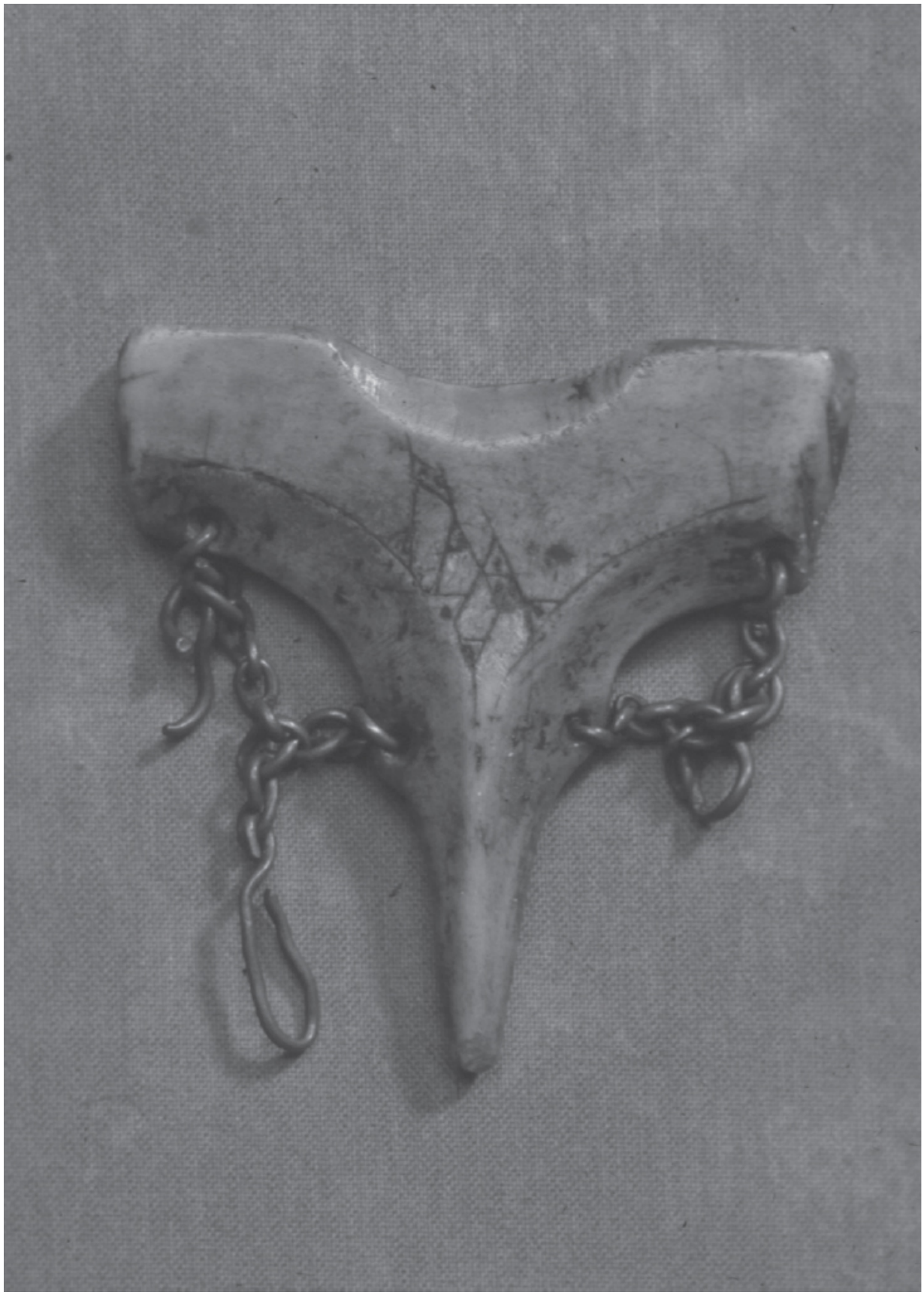


Fig. 4.7 An árpa*, the pointer used with a Sámi shamanic drum to interpret the images on its surface (photo by Jan Gustavsson, courtesy of Ájtte Svenskt Fjäll- och Samemuseum).*

Other equipment The drum was not the only item of equipment used by the *noaidi* and their female counterparts. In an account written in 1774, Thurenius mentioned that for sorcery the *noaidi* would employ the drum, the belt, axes and knives (1910: 395). As we have seen in the discussion on Sámi sorceresses, belts are mentioned several times, either hung up and used for divination or worn as a signal that rituals were to begin.

Two such belts have been preserved in the collections of the Nordic museum in Stockholm, of which one is now on loan to the Ájtte museum in Jokkmokk. Belonging at one time to the '*spålapp*' gamm' Nila – 'Old-Nila', who one should note is not the same person as Spå-Nila mentioned above – the belt had been in the same family for generations in Vilhelmina parish in Västerbotten, and was finally collected in 1895. Made of leather and fur, and decorated with cloth and metal mounts, the entire belt is hung with objects. These include a needle-case, knife, brass rings, bird claws, the penis bones of bears, and sealed leather bags whose contents is unknown.



Fig. 4.8 The reverse side of a Sámi shamanic drum of the frame-type, probably collected from Åsele. The tin-thread amulets can be clearly seen along with the penis-bone of a bear (photo by Jan Gustavsson, courtesy of Ájtte Svenskt Fjäll- och Samemuseum).

The belt is probably one of the few genuine items of a *noadi*'s dress that now survive. Very close parallels for it can be found in the belts of Netsilik shamans from central arctic Canada, of which a number of examples were collected by Knud Rasmussen on the 5th Danish Thule Expedition in 1923–24 and held at the National Museum in Copenhagen (Rasmussen 1931). These objects have a very similar array of pendant artefacts, including knives, animals parts, fur and bone. They are among the holiest aspects of a Netsilik shaman's costume, and were the first priority items to be be requested for repatriation (most of the collection has now been returned to the Netsilik).

Headbands decorated in a similar fashion are also known from the Netsilik, and one comparable piece from a Sámi context is in the collections of the Nordic Museum in Stockholm – we can only speculate as to whether headbands were also part of the *noaidi*'s equipment. The clothes of Netsilik shamans and other ritual specialists were not different in themselves from conventional dress – again like the Sámi – but they could be hung with organic amulets of a kind that would not have been preserved from an early period. As an example, the Copenhagen collections include a jacket worn by a seven-year-old boy called Tertaq, onto which an entire raven corpse had been sewn; the child was thought to be the most spiritually powerful individual in the community, and its protection resided in his person.

At least one more Sámi sorcery-belt is known from northern Norway, though this is formed very differently from the Vilhelmina example. Collected from Kautokeino, this consists of linked plates of zinc and copper, fixed together with a piece of felt between them (Kuropjatnik 1997: 43 who also describes Russian Sámi parallels).

Later ethnographic sources also mention the belts of healing women, *Dálkudiddje* in LaL, which were made of tinder-wood (Sw. *fnöske*; for a reconstruction see Tunón 2001: 385; cf. Scott 1998). This would seem to be the exact same substance used in the belt of the *volva* Þorbiorg in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4. Among the Sámi healers, the belt had curative functions, sometimes

combined with the use of snakeskin and venom. The *noaidi* also made use of *fnöske* smoke "*för att utforska en hemlighet*", "to discover a secret" (Grundström 1943–44: 95; Almqvist 2000: 244).

There is also a small amount of evidence for the use of narcotics such as fly agaric (Itkonen 1946: 149), but this is a late tradition from the Inari area of Finland. In the early sources only alcohol is mentioned, often *akvavit* (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 93).

An early medieval noaidi? The man from Vivallen

A special example of the material culture of *noaidevuohta* comes from an archaeological context, one of the most comprehensively excavated and studied Sámi localities in Sweden. The site of Vivallen, in the province of Härjedalen, lies in an area that was fully settled by Nordic communities. In 1913, Gustaf Hallström excavated 20 Viking-Age and early medieval inhumation burials here, all with grave goods characteristic of artefactual assemblages in Sámi cemeteries and sacrificial sites in northern Scandinavia (Fig. 4.9). The grave constructions, the mortuary behaviour in the form of birch bark shrouds, the disposition of the bodies, and even the physical anthropology, again all strongly indicate that the dead can be identified as Sámi (the Vivallen graves are treated at length in Zachrisson 1997, the main publication of the site building on earlier work by the South Sámi Project team members, with references therein). Further work in the 1980s located an additional burial, and also the remains of an associated settlement of *kåta* tent sites. Although I will not discuss this aspect of Vivallen here, we may note in passing that this is a particularly important example of a long-established Sámi community living south of the traditional cultural border (the Vivallen settlement is also published in Zachrisson 1997: 117–43).

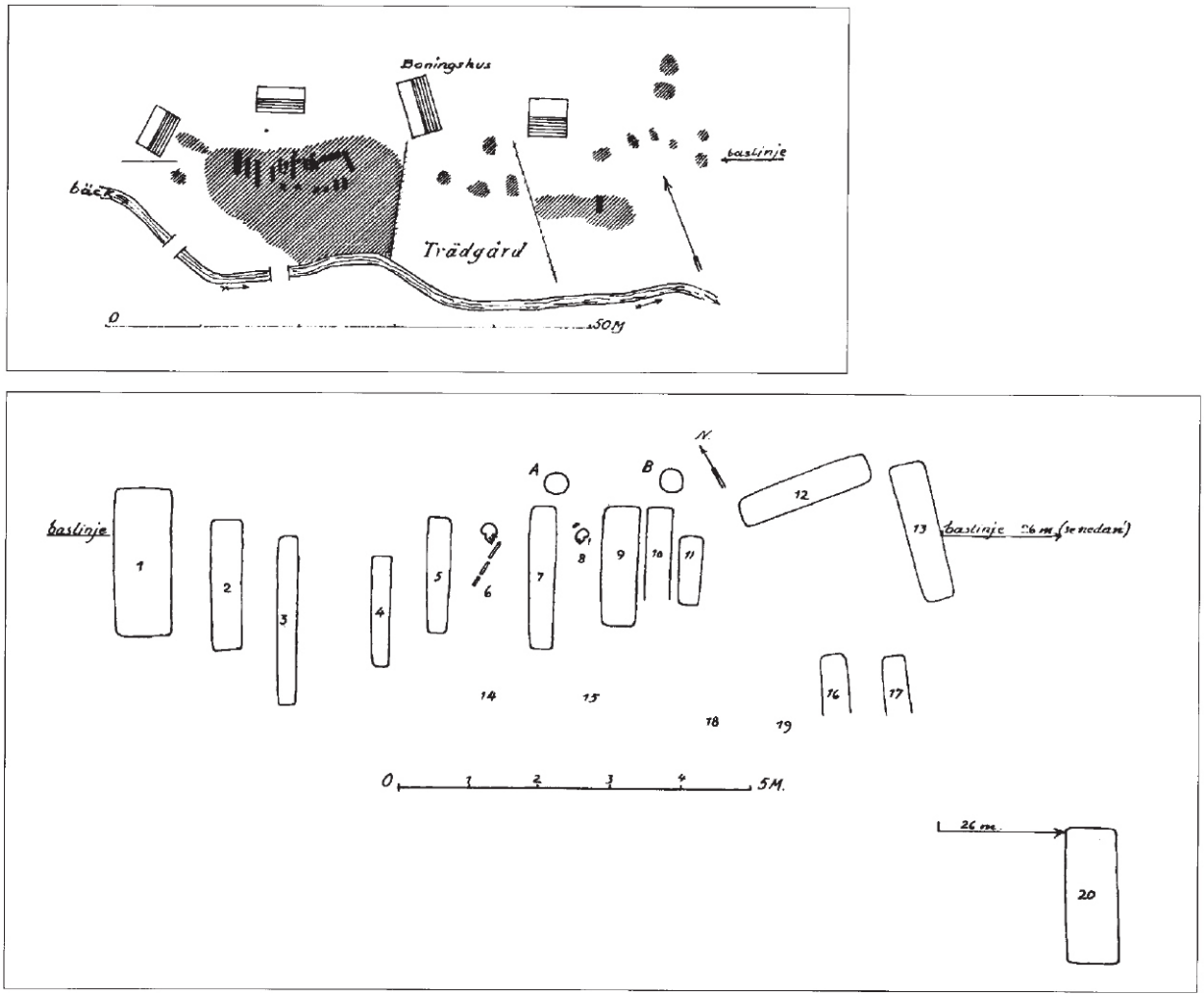


Fig. 4.9 Orientation map and plan of the excavated Sámi cemetery at Vivallen in Härjedalen; grave 9 is that of the possible noadi *(after Zachrisson 1997: 57; plans by Gustaf Hallström).*

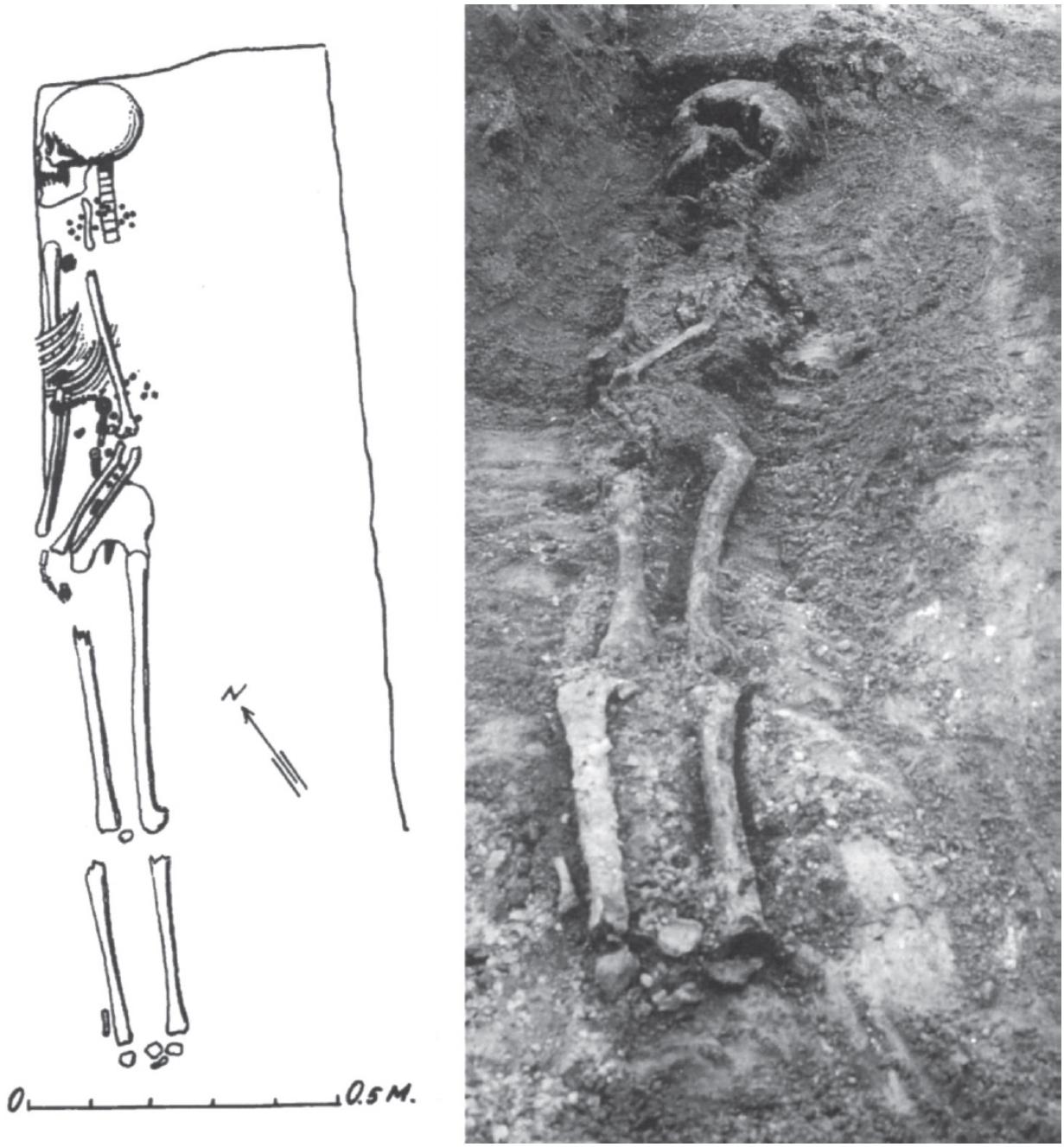


Fig. 4.10 Plan and photo of grave 9 at Vivallen, Härjedalen, during its excavation in 1913; note the body pressed against the side of the grave (after Zachrisson 1997: 58; drawing and photo by Gustaf Hallström).

In the present context we can focus on a single burial, grave 9, which contained the body of a well-built man in his fifties (Fig. 4.10). What marks the grave as unusual is that the dead man was buried not only with the kinds

of objects most often found in male inhumations, but also with a number of artefacts which are conventionally associated with women (Fig. 4.11). Furthermore, in terms of their manufacture and the context in which they are almost always found, the ‘female’ artefacts originated within the Nordic culture.

The ‘male’ artefacts focus on a complex belt made in imitation of oriental warrior harness from the steppe region of the Volga basin, of a type found in both Viking and Sámi contexts (Fig. 4.12). The ‘female’, ‘Nordic’ artefacts include a necklace of glass and rock crystal beads of types found throughout the Viking world, a silver brooch that is probably Danish, a silver finger-ring, and a needle-case of a kind known from the Viking town of Birka in Lake Mälaren, and from Gotland. The most dramatic item of female apparel was a dress of linen, of a type found again in richly appointed women’s graves from Birka (the grave 9 assemblage and its parallels are discussed in detail in Zachrisson 1997: ch. 4).

Given the linen especially, it is not going too far to say that the man in grave 9 was buried clothed as a woman from the Nordic society, with appropriate dress and jewellery, but with the addition of a few accoutrements from the conventional wardrobe of the Sámi man. What does this mean? One of the most interesting explanations that has been put forward is that the dead man may have been a *noaidi* (Zachrisson 1997: 62). The elements of sexual transgression, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity that are found in connection with shamanism all across the circumpolar area in one form or another have been discussed in chapter 3 and will be explored again in chapter 5, and it seems clear that the combination of male and female dress in Vivallen grave 9 can fit well with a shamanic interpretation, though other readings are of course possible. We can also note that the grave itself was unusual, in that the dead man was buried pushed up against one wall of the grave. The excavators could find no indication of what, if anything, had lain in the empty part of the pit. Perhaps a *noaidi* was followed into the grave by the invisible presences that were part of his life?

This grave will be considered again towards the end of this chapter, but it can stand here as the only reasonable candidate that we have from the archaeological record for the burial of a Sámi ritual specialist. His appearance would have been striking indeed, and the man from grave 9 makes an

interesting point of comparison with the possible *vǫlva*-graves that we have seen in chapter 3.

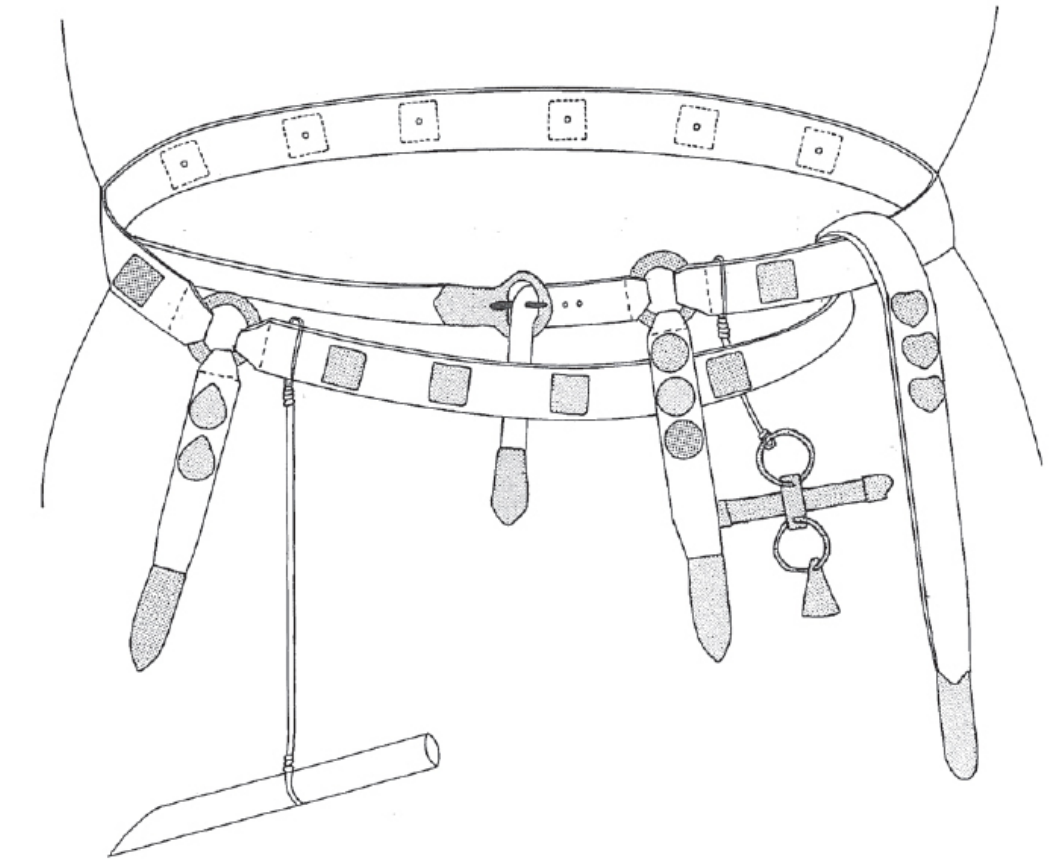




Fig. 4.11 The grave-goods of the man in grave 9 at Vivallen, Härjedalen (after Zachrisson 1997: 62; photo by Gunnel Jansson).

Sexuality and eroticism in noaidevuohta

The sexual aspects of *noaidevuohta* are not anywhere near as evident as in the *seiðr* complex, but they are nevertheless present. For the Sámi, the fact that almost all our sources were recorded by churchmen rather than ethnographers is surely of significance here. Knowing the missionaries' prudery and general antipathy, the *noaidi* would have been less likely to divulge these aspects of their rituals, and if they had done so the priests may not have recorded it.



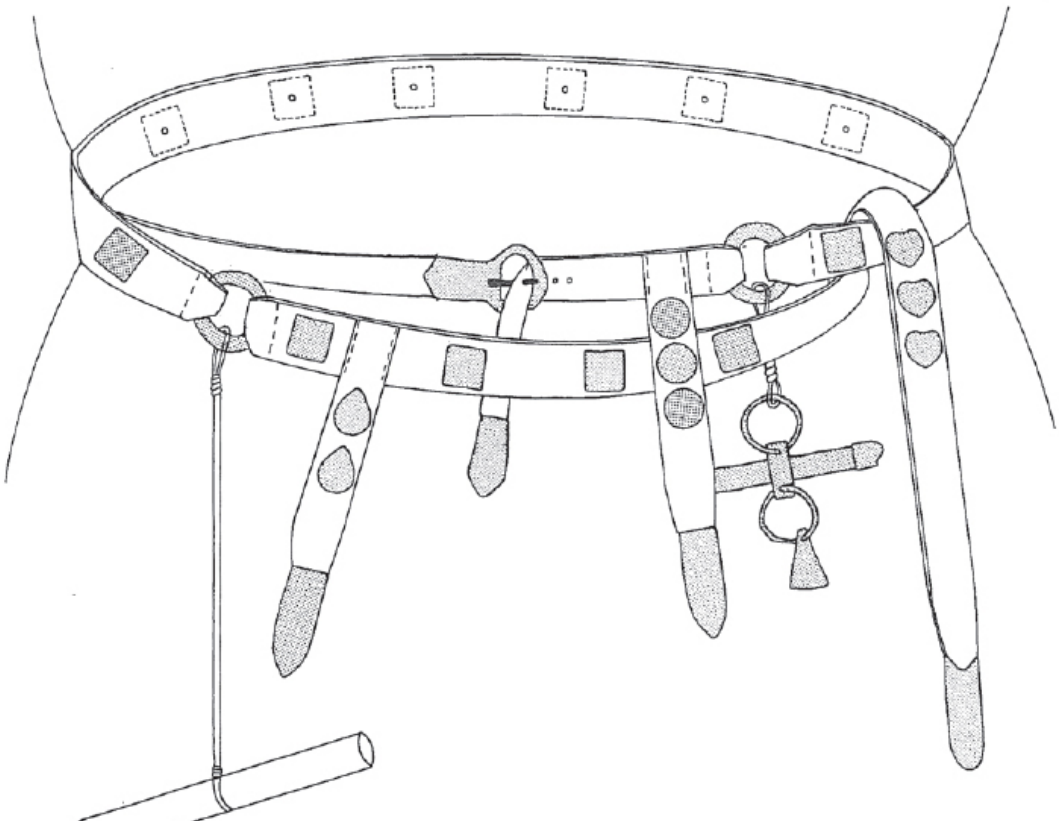




Fig. 4.12 Alternative reconstructions of the oriental-style belt from grave 9 at Vivallen, Härjedalen (after Zachrisson 1997: 73; drawings by Martin Gollwitzer).

What little we have primarily concerns the rituals themselves rather than their purpose, though a certain sexual tension between the *noaidi* and the spirits can also be discerned (intercourse with the *saajvh* has already been mentioned above). All of our main data in this respect comes from the accounts of Isaac Olsen (1910: 46f), who as we have seen in the early 1700s noted how the *noaidi* would strip naked before commencing his rituals, an action that of course need not necessarily have sexual connotations. However, we should note the *noaidi*'s behaviour when awakening from trance, having been summoned back from his soul-journey by the *jojk* of his female assistant. It may not be irrelevant in this context that, according to Olsen, the woman should if possible be an unmarried virgin. Firstly the man sings to her, praising her skills at leading him back from his trance. The text continues:
… hand self bør nu at kyse hende baade for og bag, for hendis store velgiæringer som hun nu har giort imod hannem, og for hendis stor konst og visdom, og hun skal nu have og bruge mands lem effter sin villie og som hun behager, og hun skal nu bruge den til kiøre vid siger hand, og til drage baand, og drage den over sine axeler og skuldre som en prydelse, og hun skal have den til hammel baand og Jocka baand, og om sin hals som En kiæde, og over sine skuldre som en smycke og prydelse, og binde den om kring sit lif som Et bilte …

… he himself begins to kiss her now both in front and behind, because of her great good deeds which she has done for him, and for her great skills and wisdom, and she shall now possess and use his male member as she will and as it gives her pleasure, and she shall now make use of it with a sure hand, and as a draught-rope, and to drape around her shoulders as an ornament, and she shall have it as wagon-tackle and as sled-tackle, and around her neck like a chain, and over her shoulders as an ornament and decoration, and tie it around her waist like a belt …

Olsen 1910: 46f; my translation

The first part of this account is often repeated as an instance of sexual overtones in *noaidevuohta*, but the strange continuation of the statement makes it clear that this is not entirely the case. There are strong sexual elements, certainly, but the exaggerated uses to which the *noaidi*'s penis may be put surely take this into a different context (in these qualities the *noadi* resembles the Trickster figures of circumpolar shamanism, who often have enormous phalli which they roll up, carry on their backs or around their necks, and so on; see the stories in Radin 1956).

This sexual bond between the shaman and his assistants is a consistent feature of circumpolar belief, for example among the Chukchi (Bogoraz 1904–9: 448f). Similar elements are also found in Chinese religion (Malmquist 1974: 242). These will be examined in the next chapter.

Offence and defence in noaidevuohta

We have seen many examples above of violent Sámi sorcery, most of all in the categories of *noaidi* such as the 'eaters'. It says much that the most fundamental type-division of ritual specialists ranks three *noaidi* of aggressive and violent character against one further type whose task was to deflect the attacks of the others. These patterns are repeated throughout the corpus of *noaidevuohta* ceremonies.

The shamanic duel is a common theme, as is fighting through the medium of the spirits. We see the *noaidi* as the objects of fear, wielding their drums as weapons, and filling the air with magical projectiles. Like their Nordic counterparts, they were respected and held in awe at the same time, simultaneously terrifying but vital members of their communities.

Interestingly, there is evidence that some forms of violent magic in Sámi society were performed collectively by gatherings of *noaidi*, of the kind described by Skanke amongst others. One such was the very large meeting or '*noyde-kionka*' which was called in an attempt to kill the priest Thomas von Westen, who as we have seen was one of the most zealous of the early missionaries and passionate in his hatred of the traditional Sámi religion. The ritual involved the sacrifice of no less than 14 reindeer bulls – an astonishing commitment in economic terms – but was unsuccessful (Kildal 1945: 138; Lundmark 1977: 57).

Another, rather strange, category of violence associated with Sámi belief comes with legends and stories surrounding the Northern Lights, known as *Guovsahas* in northern Sápmi (see Lundmark 1976a and b for a full discussion). The Sámi seem to have regarded them as some kind of vaguely undefined supernatural beings, associated both with extreme speed and fire, and many believed that they were clearly audible. It was thought dangerous to make a noise or otherwise attract attention to oneself when the lights were moving, in case they would become angry and kill the onlooker by burning, in a fashion somewhat akin to a lightning strike. In general there were clear associations between the lights and the idea of violent conflict. There are several stories describing how the lights are arguing or fighting amongst themselves or against others, and in many narratives they are associated with weapons, specifically of iron. These included swords, lances, and 'flaming' spears. The nature of the beings in the lights may be illuminated by Sámi beliefs from the Kola peninsula, where it was thought that they represented the souls of those killed in battle, continuing their war in astral form (Lundmark 1976a: 89). The Skolt Sámi refer to these spirits as *ruutisjammij*, 'those who died by iron', and again the link with armed conflict is striking. A similar connotation appears in the Norwegian dialect name *blodlyse*, 'blood-lights', and we can also note that they were associated with one of the few predatory animals of the far north, the arctic fox (Lundmark 1976a: 88).

These stories raise several intriguing possibilities, particularly because the association with battle is so uncharacteristic for Sámi society, which lacked organised warfare. We should especially note that none of the weapons mentioned were common among the Sámi – with the possible exception of the notion of the 'flaming' spear, which sometimes appears as a synonym for bear- and wolf-hunting spears – and it has been suggested that the weapon stories about the Northern Lights may be a Nordic loan (Lundmark 1976a: 89). This is especially interesting in the context of Nordic battle magic, the subject of later chapters, as it suggests a dim reference to some kind of armed supernatural beings, perhaps the souls of dead warriors, engaged in combat in the sky. Given the possible Nordic associations, the fact of the lights killing 'like lightning' is also striking in view of the complex relationship between the Sámi thunder-god and the comparable Nordic god, Þórr. On such meagre

evidence this theme can be pursued no further, but it *is* suggestive as background support for the ideas presented more detail below.

Sámi women and magical violence

Similar behaviour applied to the Sámi sorceresses. From post-medieval sources we begin to read of Sámi women performing spells to work magical violence, perceived as being directed for a malicious purpose. Thurenius, for example, mentions that the ability to harm or kill another person was a specific function of the *gåbeskied* (1910: 395), and Lundius says the same of the *kwepckas* (1905: 39). Leem wrote much of interest on female magic-users, whom he called *Trold-Qvinder*, 'witch-women', and amongst other harmful actions recorded that they could take animal shape to sink ships (Leem 1767: 453f).

One of the most dramatic early accounts is that concerning Kirsten Klemitsdotter, who died in the summer of 1714. The missionary Isaac Olsen writes that "she was an evil old *noaidie* woman who everybody feared and had performed much evil with her magic and caused the death of many people. And many praised God that she died and she was fetched by the *noide-gadzerna* at death's door, while she was still alive" (Olsen 1910: 76). In at least one instance Silbogåmmoe, the classic 'female *noaidi*' discussed above, was also alleged to have performed violent magic. Together with her son, Spå-Nila, she was charged by one Sven Sjulsson of having killed the latter's wife by witchcraft. The case appears unresolved, but took on a further dimension when Sjulsson himself died and Nila was successfully prosecuted for murder (Lundmark 1987: 162). Similar offensive spells were used by Spå-Ella – indeed, this seems to have been virtually the only kind of magic she performed. On two separate occasions when people annoyed her, she is recorded as having used her powers to nearly blind an old woman (the case noted above) and to have induced magical hallucinations of reindeer in a non-Sámi settler (Lundmark 1987:, 163f; ULMA 7017).

There are also tenuous linguistic sources which may suggest a connection between female rituals and violence – the SaN verb *gievvot*, noted above as one of the terms describing religious ecstasy, had a specific connotation in Jokkmokk where it referred to wrath in general and of women in particular (Rydving 1987: 195).

The functions of noaidevuohta

Having reviewed the practitioners, practices, world-views and sacred landscape of Sámi belief, we can conclude this section by summarising the various functions that *noaidevuohta* seems to have performed.

These included: finding game and performing hunting-related rituals foretelling the future (divination) uncovering secrets healing bestowing good or bad fortune (blessing and cursing) working illusions manipulating the weather causing injury to people, animals or property instilling fear or confusion in an enemy killing people providing protection from a hostile *noaidi* fighting/killing a hostile *noaidi* communicating/mediating with the dead communicating/mediating with the spirits of nature communicating/mediating with the unseen world(s) communicating/mediating with the gods We have seen above that Sámi 'shamanism' was not a static, orthodox entity, but instead exhibited considerable regional variation in the form of its expression, which even in the same areas also changed over time. Secondly, the 'Sámi shaman' was in fact a large number of specialised types of shamans, and other practitioners, concentrating on one or more specific forms of work. Thirdly, both sexes seem to have played an important role in *noaidevuohta*, again with specific and precise differences in the social functions and abilities of men and women.

We can see that *noaidevuohta* was used for broadly the same range of purposes as the *seiðr* complex, including the prosecution of a specifically violent magic, both offensive and defensive. Used for killing and shamanic combat, a crucial difference from the Norse situation comes here with the surrounding social context: as far as we know the Sámi did not make war. We shall explore this in chapter 6.

The ethnicity of religious context in Viking-Age Scandinavia

To the extent that we may trust the sagas, there are several indications that the Norse identified the operative magical practices of the Sámi as something quite distinct from their own, while nevertheless retaining essential similarities.

This can be seen not least in a number of terms in Old Norse, such as *finnvitka*, meaning 'to practise magic in a Finn way' (Mundal 1996: 112). We

also find the concept of *fara til finna at spyria spá*, ‘travelling to the Finns to receive a prediction’ and even euphemisms like *gera finnfarar*, ‘to pay a visit to the Finns’ (DuBois 1999: 129).

Another common pattern is that of magical instruction, when the Norse turn to the Sámi for help in these matters (Hermann Pálsson 1997: ch. 9). The classic example is that of Gunnhildr, later to be the wife of Eiríkr blóðøx, who in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (33) is sent to the Sámi by her father in order to be taught the skills of sorcery. She also seduces the men who teach her, and thereby persuades them to pass on additional magical knowledge. In another source, the fragmentary thirteenth-century *Lífssaga Ólafs helga* by Styrmir Kárason, we read of a sorcerer named Þórir who spends the winter of 1029–30 with a Sámi chieftain in order to learn magic from him. A much earlier text, Sigvatr Þórðarson’s *Erfi drápa Ólafs helga* from *c.*1040, seems to confirm this when noting that Þórir survived an otherwise fatal sword-thrust at the Battle of Stiklastaðir in 1030 due to the sorcery he learnt from the Finns.

Similarly, there are often sorcerous overtones to another common pattern in the sources, involving Nordic kings marrying, or simply sleeping with, Sámi women. The latter are often described as the daughters of Sámi rulers, as in the case of Snæfríðr in *Haralds saga hárfagra* discussed above, and in the epigraph to this chapter (the Drífa who hires a *seiðkona* to bring her husband back to Lappland is one such Sámi ‘princess’).

As we have seen, several sagas include passages in which Scandinavians hire Sámi to perform sorcery on their behalf. A useful example comes from *Vatnsdæla saga* 10. Near the beginning of the saga, the Norwegian Ingimundr Þórsteinsson receives a prophecy that will ultimately send him to Iceland, where he will become the long-lived patriarch of the people of Vatnsdal. The circumstances under which this prophecy is given, its consequences, and the material objects to which it incidentally refers are of great interest in the present context:

Ingjaldr fór heim ok bauð morgum monnum með sér. Síðan fór hverr sem boðit var. Þeir Ingjaldr efna þar seið eptir fornum sið, til þess at menn leitaði eptir forlogum sínum. Þar var komin Finna ein fjolkunnig. Ingimundr ok Grímr kómu til veizlunnar með miklu fjolmenni. Finnan var sett hátt ok búit um hana vegliga; þangat gengu menn til frétta, hverr ór sínu rúmi, ok spurðu at ørlogum sínum. Hon spáði hverjum eptir því sem gekk, en þat var nokkut

misjafnt, hversu hverjum líkaði. … Finnan svarar: ”Þetta mun fram koma, sem ek segi, ok þat til marks, at hlutr er horfinn ór pússi þínum, sá er Haraldr konungr gaf þér í Hafrsfirði, ok er hann nú kominn í holt þat, er þú munt byggja, ok er á hlutnum markaðr Freyr af silfri; ok þá er þú reisir bœ þinn, mun saga mín sannask”.

Ingjaldr returned home and invited many people to the feast. All those invited duly attended. Ingjaldr and his men prepared a *seiðr* performance in the old manner, so that men could examine what the fates had in store for them. A Finn sorceress was among those present. Ingimundr and Grímr arrived at the feast with a large retinue. The Finn woman sat on a high seat, and was splendidly attired; men left their benches and went forward to ask about their destinies. She predicted for each of them that which eventually came to pass, but each took the news in a different way. [Ingimundr says that he does not want to hear his fortune told, but the woman tells it anyway, and predicts that he will settle in Iceland. Ingimundr scoffs at the idea, and says he has no such intention] The Finn woman answered: “What I am saying will come to pass and, as a sign of this, an amulet is missing from your purse – the gift which King Haraldr gave you at Havsfjorðr – and it now lies in the wood where you will settle, and on this silver amulet the figure of Freyr is carved and when you establish your homestead there, then my prophecy will be fulfilled.”

Vatnsdæla saga 10; translation after Wawn 1997: 204–5 with my amendments

Ingimundr is uneasy about the prediction, especially as the king suggests that maybe Freyr has it in mind that he should go to Iceland after all. Not wanting to leave Norway, Ingimundr nevertheless decides to make enquiries. He declares his intention of sending for certain Sámi, *er mér sýni heraðs voxt ok lands skipun, þar sem ek skal vera, ok ætla ek at senda þá til Íslands* (‘who can show me the extent of the region and the lie of the land where I will be living; and I intend to send them to Iceland’; *Vatnsdæla saga* 12). The saga continues:

Hann sendir eptir Finnum, ok kómu norðan þrír. Ingimundr segir, at hann vill kaupa at þeim, – “ok vil ek gefa yðr smjor ok tin, en þér farið sendiferð mína til Íslands at leita eptir hlut mínum ok segja mér frá landslegi.” Þeir svara: “Semsveinum er þat forsending at fara, en fyrir þína áskorun vilju vér prófa.

Nú skal oss byrgja eina saman í húsi, ok nefni oss engi maðr," – ok svá var gort. Ok er liðnar váru þrjár nætr, kom Ingimundr til þeira. Þeir risu þá upp ok vorpuðu fast ondini ok mæltu: "Semsveinum er erfitt, ok mikit starf hofu vér haft, en þó munu vér með þeim jarteinum fara, at þú munt kenna land, ef þú kemr, af várri frásogn, en torvelt varð oss eptir at leita hlutinum, okmega mikit atkvæði Finnunnar, því at vér hofu lagt ossí mikla ánauð. Þar kómu vér á land, sem þrír firðir gengu af landnorðri ok votn váru mikil fyrir innan einnfjorðin. Síðan kómu vér í dal einn djúpan, ok í dalnum undir fjalli einu váru holt nokkur; þar var byggiligr hvammr, ok þar í holtinu oðru var hlutinn, ok er vér ætluðum at taka hann, þá skauzk hann í annantholtit, ok svá sem vér sóttum eptir, hljóp hann æ undan, ok nokkur hulða lá ávallt yfir, svá at vér náðum eigi, ok muntu sjálfr fara verða."

He sent for the Finns, and three of them came from the north. Ingimundr said that he wanted to make a bargain with them – "I will give you butter and tin, and you are to undertake an errand for me in Iceland and search for my amulet and report back to me about the lie of the land." They answered, "This is a hazardous mission for *Semsveinar* to undertake, but in response to your request we want to make an attempt. You must now shut us up together in a house, and do not give our names to any man." This was duly done. And when three nights had passed, Ingimundr went to them. They stood up and sighed deeply and said, "It has been hard for us *Semsveinar*, and we have had much toil and trouble, but nevertheless we have returned with these tokens so that you may recognise the land from our account, if you go there; but it was very difficult for us to search for the amulet, and the spell of the Finn woman was a powerful one, because we placed ourselves in great jeopardy. We arrived at a spot where three fjords open up to the north-east and in one fjord there were big lakes to be seen. We later entered a long valley and there at the foot of a mountain were some wooded areas. It was a habitable hillside, and there in one of the woods was the amulet, but when we tried to pick it up, it flew off into another wood, and as we pursued it, it always flew away, and some sort of cover always lay over it, so that we could not get hold of it; and so it is that you yourself must go there."

Vatnsdæla saga 12; translation after Wawn 1997: 207–8 with my amendments

The same episodes are also referred to in *Landnámabók*, where the Sámi *volva* is given the name Heiðr, and we then read how: *sendi hann* [Ingimundr] *þá finna tvá í hamforum til Íslands eptir hlut sínum,* 'he sent two Finns to Iceland in assumed shapes to recover his talisman'. While we clearly cannot take this as direct evidence for a Viking-Age reality, given the relatively low source value of saga prose, it nonetheless shows that this level of religious interaction was anything but unthinkable in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. More importantly, it is worth considering just how many of the same functions that we have seen in this chapter and the preceding one are combined in this episode, and others like it. In view of the material previously reviewed, then this combination alone is a powerful argument that we should take these kinds of descriptions seriously in our attempts to reconstruct the context of Old Norse sorcery.

As Tolley notes (1995a: 62), there is another account of a similar mission in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (33) when Haraldr Gormsson sends a *kunnugr maðr* to ascertain details of Iceland – he too travels in beast shape, as a whale. Like the Sámi employed by Ingimundr, this man also encounters problems from spirits he meets on the way (see chapter 6 below, where the example is treated in more detail). It is not specified that this 'knowledgeable man' was a Sámi, but either this was the case – we know from *Historia Norvegiae* and other sources that Sámi sorcerers travelled in whale form – or else it implies that Norse sorcerers behaved exactly like their Sámi counterparts. Both of these conclusions are suggestive.

We can conclude this chapter with an archaeological example, and return to the possible *noaidi* grave from Vivallen. This provides us with an extraordinary chance to examine Sámi-Norse relations in a spiritual context. The cross-cultural grave-goods here can be considered in terms of the cultural biography of objects – essentially the 'life story' of artefacts from their manufacture to their entry into the archaeological record (cf. Marshall & Gosden 1999). Some of the items buried with the man in grave 9 are without doubt of non-Sámi manufacture (the dress, the beads, the jewellery and equipment). They were made in a permanent settlement – perhaps a village or even a town – by people who ethnically belonged to the Nordic cultural tradition. It is possible that they were made for trade with the Sámi, but more likely that they were produced as items for use by Nordic women. At some

point, these objects moved across a cultural and ethnic border, and were acquired by the Sámi at Vivallen. This was probably a peaceful process, a matter of trade and exchange, as we have no evidence whatsoever for violent relations between the two cultures here. At this point the objects moved from the context of a settled, agrarian society to a mobile, nomadic one.

They also moved across a border of gender, and were transformed from items of women's clothing and adornment to the possessions of a man, but in a special way which seems to refer to their former life as 'female objects'. There is another transition too, of social context: in the Nordic society these were objects for everyday wear, but in the Sámi community they may have been the property of the most important individual in the group. The objects were thus altered from a conception of 'dress' and 'jewellery' to an understanding of them as items of ritual apparel and equipment: symbolic changes and functional ones.

The identity constructions involved here are worth considering. These are not just the bald ethnic statements of 'Norse' and 'Sámi', but also of settlers and nomads; agriculturalists and pastoralists; men and women, and a possible third gender; individuals of high and middling status; religious specialists and secular people; those who could travel between the worlds, and those who could not.

We should also understand that this was not a case of objects travelling completely away from one place to another, out of sight and out of mind. The Nordic population of the Vivallen area would have been quite familiar with the man in grave 9, and his community – after all, they lived practically side by side. We can only speculate as to whether this individual went about in life dressed as he was in death. Did his Nordic neighbours know how these objects were being used?

The similarities between *seiðr* and the practices of the Sámi have long been obvious, but I feel that a mistake has been made by most of the scholars who have previously looked at these phenomena, in that they have engaged themselves from the beginning with questions of 'influence' and 'loans' from one culture to another. In this chapter and the one preceding I have instead tried to analyse both *seiðr* and *noaidevuohta* as independent traditions in their own right, examining them side by side before comparing them directly. In one of her studies of religion in the high arctic, Pat Sutherland has perfectly

expressed this situation; for her Palaeo-Eskimos and Inuit I have here substituted terms relevant to the present context:
Rather than viewing evidence for similarities between [Norse] and [Sámi] cosmological or religious beliefs as indicative of a ‘common symbolic reservoir’ … we might more aptly visualise parallel symbolic streams flowing from an ancient past and contributing in unique ways to the reservoir of beliefs among the northern peoples Sutherland 2001: 143

In taking such a pan-Scandinavian perspective we have still taken a step closer to the circumpolar sphere to which others have run immediately, but with the necessary awareness of distance. We have seen how Sámi religion can without doubt be interpreted against the background of the circumpolar culture of which the Sámi are a part, but we cannot simply compare Scandinavia with allegedly parallel traditions further and further away across Siberia and the far north. If we are to move eastwards (and, to some extent, westwards to arctic Greenland and North America), then we must do so cautiously, critically, and specifically. We must also continue to pursue the unique traits that served to distinguish *seiðr* and *noaidevuohta* from each other, while bearing in mind the strands of interdependence that bound them together at a cultural frontier between the Germanic and circumpolar worlds. As far as possible, up to this point I have deliberately kept the discussion of Norse religion relatively independent of the labels used to characterise the belief systems of the arctic and sub-arctic. However, it is now time to enter another interpretive context, and to address the question of Old Norse shamanism.

5

Circumpolar religion and the question of Old Norse shamanism

Historians of religion sometimes have a tendency to talk as if 'shamanism' were something concrete, thereby forgetting that it only exists as an abstraction and a concept in the brains of its students.

Håkan Rydving, 'Shamanistic and postshamanistic terminologies in Saami (Lappish)'. (1987: 186f)

The circumpolar cultures and the invention of shamanism

Even the most sceptical of modern scholars acknowledge that some kind of reality lay behind the sagas' descriptions of *seiðr*, and that this can be approached effectively through ethnographic analogy (e.g Foote & Wilson 1980: xxiv).

The notion that some form of cultural affinity or cohesion existed between the peoples of the circumpolar region is a development of the early twentieth century (I have been chiefly reliant on Hultkrantz's exceptionally lucid 1965 study for this early phase of research). Until the early 1900s there were certainly many working on this idea within limited geographical frameworks – across the Bering Strait for example, or within specific tracts of Siberia – but on a global scale the disparate strands of thinking within ethnology and what was then called anthropogeography were first drawn together by Byhan in his 1909 study of *Die Polarvölker.* He counted amongst this group the Sámi, Samoyeds, Ostyak, Eskimo (Inuit) and all the Siberian peoples north of Lake Baikal. He made a deliberate point of

excluding the northern tribes of Native Americans, and this may have been a reflection of the early white American reluctance to acknowledge the region as a 'culture area' (as seen in Bacon's work from 1946, though this position was not universally adopted – see Naroll 1950 for an outspoken alternative). From the late 1960s onwards, the 'circumpolar' concept was extended through the Canadian arctic and the northernmost parts of the United States to encircle the globe. All the peoples living within this area are conventionally included among the 'circumpolar cultures'.

Scandinavia occupies a unique position in relation to the circumpolar region, as its main cultures span both the sub-arctic zone and the sphere of Germanic culture focused upon in earlier chapters. Although a more detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this book, we may also note in this context a different kind of overlap in south Scandinavia between Germanic and Celtic cultural ideas (Görman 1990). While the case for this can be over-stated, at some level it seems plausible to suggest that in this way the culture of the Norse found itself at the meeting point of three separate traditions: it lay at the northern periphery of the Germanic world, with southerly tangential contacts with the Celtic sphere, and – via the Sámi – in a major frontier zone with the circumpolar cultures that form the subject of this chapter.

This region is sometimes divided into the arctic or polar zone, with no warm season at all, and the sub-arctic with more than six months of temperatures below 5°C. The latter includes the *taiga* forests of central Siberia, northern Russia and Scandinavia, Iceland (which was once wooded), the Canadian interior and southern Alaska. Everywhere north of this area, including all of Greenland and northern Siberia, falls within the *tundra* of the arctic proper.

The differences in arctic and sub-arctic vegetation type and climate are important, as they bring with them the flora and fauna native to these environments, and hence determine the preconditions for human subsistence in these areas. Early attempts at matching this to archaeologically or ethnographically recorded settlement patterns included Ohlmarks' thesis from 1939, mentioned earlier, which proposed an ecological model (see his maps 1–3), and Gjessing's concept of the

‘circumpolar Stone Age’ (1944). Crucially, the study of connections between the peoples of the far north, which of course began long before the circumpolar concept was formulated, had from the beginning been rooted in a perception of their spiritual life: the complex of shamanism.

The French ethnologist Michel Perrin (1992:9) has called shamanism, *l’un des grands systèmes imaginés par l’homme pour expliquer, soulager ou prévenir l’infortune. Et le rêve, lié à la maladie et à la mort, lui est étroitement associé*. Shamanism appears here as an explanatory framework for reality, in which human aspirations and the need for protection are formulated in dreams and transcend the borders of death. How did this notion come to such prominence, how was it formed, and how can it be articulated?

The shamanic encounter

When a dissident priest called Avvakum arrived in the lands of the nomadic, reindeer-herding Evenki in the early 1650s, having been exiled to central Siberia by the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, no outsider had ever heard of a *šaman*, let alone written the word down or explored the cosmological understandings that underpinned its meaning. By the time of his execution for heresy in 1682, the descriptions of his sojourn among the Evenki that Avvakum had published ten years earlier had already laid the foundations for what anthropologists would later term the study of shamanism.

Although Avvakum’s memoirs from 1672 included the first printed mention of the word *šaman*, the first account of a Siberian shamanic performance actually predates this by almost a century. In the mid-1500s an Englishman called Richard Johnson had travelled along the coast of northwestern Siberia, where he visited a people that can probably be identified as the Nenets (Hutton 2001: 30). On New Year’s Day 1557 he was an observer of what he described as “devilish rites”, and left a long and very detailed note of what he saw. This first appeared in 1598–1600 in the expanded, second edition of a volume collected by a much more famous man, the explorer Richard Hakluyt, but is today surprisingly little known. Johnson’s account is unfortunately too substantial to quote in its entirety here (see Johnson 1598–1600; a modern English version of the relevant

passage is given by Hutton 2001: 30ff), but we can simply observe that almost all the elements that anthropologists would later ascribe to the shamanic complex are present, recorded by an uncomprehending Elizabethan adventurer in the language of his time.

Over the following two hundred and fifty years, as Siberia was traversed by missionaries, political exiles (often highly educated intellectuals), Tsarist agents and European travellers, more and more stories were recorded of the intriguing beliefs and practices to be found among the tribal peoples there: from the Nenets, Mansi, Khanty, Ngansan and Enets of the Uralic group around the Yamal peninsula, the Ob and Yenisei river basins and the north Siberian coast; the Turkic-speaking Dolgan and Yakut (or Sakha) on the lower Lena; the Tungusic-Mandchurian peoples of central Siberia, including the Even and the Evenki themselves; and the Yukaghir, Chukchi, Koryak and Itelmen of eastern Siberia and the Pacific coast, amongst many others.

The tales told by these early voyagers were startling, and aroused intense interest from St. Petersburg to London. Particularly influential were the accounts deriving from Joseph Billings' maritime expedition that explored northern Russia and America in 1785–94 by command of Catherine the Great. Popular versions of the mission's ethnographic reports were soon in circulation, and eagerly consumed in the courts and drawing rooms of Europe.

A fragmentary picture emerged of an 'ensouled world' in which everything was alive, and filled with spirits – animals, natural features, even what to Western eyes were inanimate objects. To such beings could be linked almost every aspect of material life: sickness and health, the provision of food and shelter, success in hunting, the fortunes of sex, and the well-being of the community. The maintenance of good relationships with these spirits was thus of crucial importance, and the most striking of the travellers' stories concerned the special individuals who took charge of this. These people were seen to attain what we would now call altered states of consciousness, in order to send out their souls to communicate with these beings, to enlist their aid or bind them to their will, sometimes even to engage them in combat. The operative sphere of these people, whom the

Evenki called *šaman*, was revealed as a world of mediation, of negotiation between the realm of human beings and the adjacent, occasionally coincident, planes of existence in which dwelt the gods, the spirits of nature, and the souls of the dead. The complex variety of equipment used in these ceremonies was also described: the strange headgear, hats crowned with antlers and fantastic arrangements of wood or leather; jackets hung with jingling amulets, adorned with fur, feathers and even the whole bodies of animals; the garments covered with bronze figures, bells and hundreds of long straps; the masks and veils; the effigies and figurines; and above all, the drums (Figs 5.1–5.5).

Some of this data was published and widely discussed in scholarly circles, and during the eighteenth century the Evenk concept of the *šaman* was taken up in Russian as a useful collective for the similar figures that were encountered from one tribe to another across the region (a process charted in Flaherty 1992: 21–66). The indigenous Siberians had no written language, and so the phonetic constructions used to record these concepts resulted in the term *šaman* or *sama:n.* This was soon normalised via Russian to the western European languages, creating the more conventional ‘shaman’. We may note that the Evenki pronounced the word with the accent on the second syllable, ‘sha-márn’, but the alternative forms of ‘shár-man’ or ‘sháyman’ are now more common. The term has also been taken up as a verb, in an attempt to render a similar indigenous use of the appropriate regional terms – thus in the secondary literature one can often read of a shaman ‘shamanising’. As we have seen in chapter 2, the same is true of *seiðr* in Old Norse.

The term *šaman* seems to have literally meant ‘one who is excited, moved or raised’, but also has connotations of hard work, tiredness as a result of exertion, and other aspects of ritual effort. Among the Tungus-speaking peoples there were other variants, such as *hamman* and *samman*, but in general each of the Siberian peoples had their own terms for the equivalent in their respective cultures. Among the Yakut the male specialist of this kind was called the *oïun*; for the Mongols he was the *buge*, a word also used by the Buryat together with *bö*; in the Altai and among the Tartars he was called *kam* or *gam*; for the Kirgis he was a *baksa* or *basky*; among

the Samoyeds these people were called *tadibey* (Czaplicka 1914: 198). Interestingly this diversity of terms for male sorcerers was not found among their female counterparts, who right across this cultural spectrum were called by a variant of the same word: *utagan*, *udagan*, *udaghan*, *ubakhan*, *utygan*, *utiugun*, *iduan*, *duana* (*ibid*).





Fig. 5.1 A shaman costume from the Evenk people of eastern Siberia, from whom the term šaman *derives; note the mask and staffs (after Gilberg 1993: 13).*





Fig. 5.2 A female Evenk shaman, photographed in 1931 (after Gilberg 1993: 22; photo E. J. Lindgren).



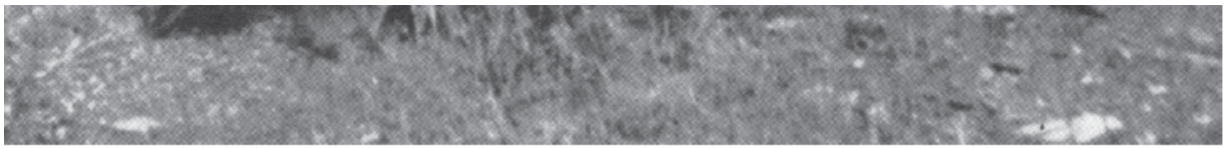


Fig. 5.3 An Altai shaman (after Nioradze 1925: 88f).

At first, there were few that associated these individuals, and the role that they played within their communities, with ‘religion’ in the sense of an organised system of worship. The notion of shaman*ism* as a collective pattern of belief arose first when the Christian missions began to seriously target the Siberian peoples for conversion, and thus sought to identify a pagan faith towards the overthrow of which they could concentrate their efforts (see Thomas & Humphrey 1994, and Znamenski 1999, for useful studies of church/ state perceptions of indigenous belief).



2.



1.





Fig. 5.4 The antiquity of Siberian shamanism 1: prehistoric rock-art images showing shamans with fringed jackets and drums, with close parallels to ethnographically-recorded examples from later centuries. 1. Oglakhty, Middle Yenisei River; 2. Middle Yenisei River; 3. Mokhsogolokh-Khaja, Middle Lena River (after Devlet 2001: 47; based on Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972, Kyzlasov and Leontiev 1980, Miklashevich 1998). See also Janik 2007.

In his book *Shamans: Siberian spirituality and the Western imagination* (2001, building on a shorter volume from 1993), Ronald Hutton has published a compact but nuanced analysis of this 'creation' of shamanism. Rather than offering new definitions or histories for the concept, Hutton instead provides a contextualised discussion of why shamanism has been interpreted in different ways at different times. The earlier parts of his study, summarising the politics of ethnography in Tsarist and Soviet Siberia, should be read by anyone interested in the shamanic complex. We shall return to this theme below.

The early ethnographies: shamanic research in Russia and beyond

This question as to the exact nature of shamanism has been central to shamanic studies from the very beginning. Already in 1853, the Finnish scholar Castrén challenged the idea that shamanism could be described as a religion rather than as a pattern of behaviour, and this debate continued throughout the late 1800s when the first major Russian works on the subject appeared. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this social, psychological and (arguably) religious phenomenon was already the subject of an established body of literature (see, for example, Shashkov 1864; Potanin 1881–83; Agapitov & Khangalov 1883; Radloff 1884; Pripuzov 1885; Mikhailovski 1895; Shimkevich 1896; Sieroszewski 1896, 1902; this period of early research is summarised in Hultkrantz 1998).



Fig. 5.5 The antiquity of Siberian shamanism 2: the dress of a female shaman from Ust'-Uda, reconstructed from a Bronze Age burial (after Okladnikov 1955).

Similar practices had earlier been described from other parts of the northern hemisphere, as for example in Schefferus' influential book *Lapponia* (1673) that we have seen in chapter 4. However, it was not until the early 1900s that the beliefs of other circumpolar arctic and sub-arctic cultures began to be specifically – though tentatively – described in terms of shamanism. This development was largely due to the Jesup North Pacific Expedition and the publication of its findings.

This remarkable venture was launched from the American Museum in New York in 1897, with the objective of analysing early contacts between Siberia and Alaska, and in the hope of illuminating the possible Asian origins of the Native American peoples. For the first two years several American researchers conducted fieldwork in Alaska and in the Canadian Northwest, providing the primary ethnographies for the study of these peoples, to which we shall return below. At the same time a German team worked on Sakhalin and in the Amur region in 1898–99, while a third team of Russian scientists explored north-eastern Siberia from 1899 to 1903. The resulting work was published over the next two decades in a series of massive volumes which still form some of the most fundamental sources for the Siberian peoples (see Freed *et al.* 1988 and Krupnik & Fitzhugh 2001 for a full account of the expedition's origins and composition).

The eastern Siberian work was led by Vladimir Bogoraz and his friend and colleague Vladimir Jochelson (their forenames appear in the literature as 'Waldemar', and Bogoraz as 'Bogoras', after the American spelling of their publications). In their youth both had been exiled to these regions for anti-Tsarist revolutionary activities. There they had developed an affinity for the Siberian natives that resulted in their choice of ethnography for a career, and years later they were hired by the Americans to conduct fieldwork focused on the Chukchi, Koryak, Yukaghir and Yakut (Sakha) peoples. The fieldwork was difficult and dangerous – Bogoraz nearly died – and both men were accompanied by their wives. While their husbands undertook field journeys to talk to Siberian informants, the women were responsible for amassing most of the astonishing material collections that can still be seen in New York today (for example, the Bogorazes brought back 5000 artefacts, documented 450 tales and texts, made 95 wax cylinder recordings, collected 75 skulls and made 33 plaster face casts, and made physical anthropological studies of 860 individuals – all in a space of 18 months). After the expedition, both ethnographers continued with their political engagements and were persecuted by the Tsarist regime; Bogoraz had actually been briefly arrested on his return to St. Petersburg in 1904. However, after the revolution their destinies were very different. Bogoraz (1865–1936), whose descriptions of the Chukchi are noticeably less

sympathetic to them than Jochelson's are of the other peoples, published widely and rose to become director of the Institute of the Peoples of the North. Here he established the first Soviet policies for the Siberians, that attempted to replace their traditional culture with a 'modern' lifestyle. Jochelson (1855–1937) also prospered, leading further expeditions to Kamchatka and becoming a director of the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography, but in 1922 he became disenchanted with the revolution and left Russia for the United States where he lived until his death 15 years later (see Krader's biographies from 1968).

The English-language publications from the Jesup Expedition, such as the reports by Bogoraz (1904–9) and Jochelson (1908, 1926), greatly eased the link to Siberia in Western research. In 1914 came another milestone, when the Polish scholar Marie Antoinette Czaplicka published her monumental survey of *Aboriginal Siberia* that remains a standard work even today. Here she traced a chronological evolution from what she called 'family shamanism', in which the rituals were organised communally and within the household as need arose, to the later 'professional' system familiar from the early European ethnographic accounts (*ibid*: 167).

In 1935 this was followed by Shirokogorov's classic *Psychomental complex of the Tungus*. Through the early twentieth century the notion of shamanism spread slowly in North America, being applied to the 'medicine-men' of First Nations peoples, but even here the definitions common in Siberia were being adapted to local circumstances (*e.g.* Dixon 1908).

Although shamanism was widely adopted as a psychological and psychiatric concept in the years between the world wars, as Hultkrantz has noted, "it is difficult to find surveys of [non-Russian] shamanism before 1950" (1998: 61). There were, however, many foreigners working on the Siberian material. Finnish researchers were particularly active (*e.g.* Holmberg [Harva] 1987 [1915], 1927, 1938; Granö 1919–21; Donner 1922; Lehtisalo 1924, 1937; other significant Western works include Stadling 1912 and Nioradze 1925), while post-Revolutionary Russian research continued within the strict ideological frameworks of Marxist interpretations (see Hultkrantz 1998: 65ff and Balzer 1990). Until the fall of

the Soviet Union, or at least the late 1980s, the division between Western and Eastern studies of shamanism was almost total.

Soviet writers such as Zelenin (1936, 1937, 1952) and Anisimov (1963) sought to explain shamanism in terms of a particular concentration of power and shifting control of production, with an additional emphasis on medical interpretations often based on notions of mental illness. The explanation of shamanism as due to a kind of 'arctic hysteria' induced by cold and deprivation was adopted with enthusiasm in Soviet Russia, where it became fundamental in the policies of suppressing this perceived threat of independent thought and spiritual allegiance.

The concept of arctic hysteria has long antecedents, and is found in some of the earliest writings on Siberia (*e.g.* Gmelin 1751–52: vol. III pp. 105, 379ff; Krasheninnikov 1764; Pallas 1771–74: 17f; Steller 1774: 279). Among the Jesup volumes it was particularly emphasised by Jochelson, and to a lesser extent by Bogoraz. The erotic overtones of this condition were stressed by several authors (*e.g.* Czaplicka 1914: 310f), and numerous detailed accounts of what anthropologists would now call spirit possession were collected not only from Siberia but also among the Inuit in Greenland and the peoples of arctic North America. Discussions of this phenomenon were relatively free from racist overtones in the early twentieth century, but by 1939 when Ohlmarks published his work on shamanism, the notion of arctic hysteria had come to stand for the perceived primitivism of the 'lower races' that underpinned so much of the pseudo-science of the time. Under the Soviet regime, the shaman as a kind of ultimate arctic hysteric joined the idea of the shaman as mentally-unbalanced psychopath as the preferred conclusion of 'scientific' reports.

Ethnocentric explanations were also given prominence, while other Russian scholars sought refuge in collecting raw data which did not need to be forced into an ideologically-inspired interpretative straitjacket (the research from this period is summarised in Popov's bibliography from 1932, listing some 650 Russian works on shamanism; a German-language version appeared in 1990). The scholars who maintained a most strictly empirical line, and thus avoided the regime's appropriation of their work, are now bearers of the tradition of Russian research in the post-Soviet era

(*e.g.* Vajnstein and Basilov – see Hultkrantz, 1998: 66, for an assessment of these writers' significance).

Long into the twentieth century the twin poles of discussion revolved around the definition of shamanism as either a 'primitive religion' or part of one – the crucial point being whether it was a self-contained system or a component in a larger pattern of belief. Terminologies were as inconsistent then as now, with a plethora of vaguely articulated concepts such as 'religio-magic' and 'preanimism' (*e.g.* Czaplicka 1914: 166, 168). However, even in some of the earliest studies it was clear that shamanism was also perceived as a view of reality over and above the specifics of its rituals. As Banzarov put it in 1891 writing about the Mongolian shamanism known as the 'Black Faith', it could be defined as "a certain primitive way of observing the outer world – Nature – and the inner world – the soul" (1891: 4f, translated from the Russian). This debate continues today.

Shamanism in anthropological perspective

As Håkan Rydving has noted, "historians of religion sometimes have a tendency to talk as if 'shamanism' were something concrete, thereby forgetting that it only exists as an abstraction and a concept in the brains of its students" (1987: 186f). The research history of shamanism in Western anthropology, comparative theology and related disciplines has been charted many times, and this is not the place for yet another introductory essay on the 'meaning' of this phenomenon. However, we can make a broad survey of the literature and the main trends that have evolved (Hultkrantz 1998 provides an excellent overview).

If there is one single text that has come to dominate perceptions of these belief systems in Western research, it is undoubtedly Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy*, first published in French in 1951 and continuously in print ever since. Almost all subsequent work has been drawn into the orbit of Eliade's book, and despite its shortcomings it is still the mostly widely-used work of reference for those working in disciplines *outside* the specific study of religion. This is significant, because in practice very few comparative theologists or anthropologists rely on this work any longer, partly because of the narrow field on which it focuses, and partly

because it has quite simply been superceded by a great many other publications.

One problem with Eliade's approach to shamanism is his emphasis on ecstasy and trance as primary requisites for a shamanic definition. In some measure this is still generally accepted, but at the same time there are also many variants of these traditions, even in Siberia, where the shamanic communion is constructed through rituals rather than directly altered states of consciousness; some of these are examined below. This focus on ecstasy, deriving we must remember from a work written in the 1950s, is also the primary reason why the modern, popular definitions of shamanism are so broad, extending far beyond what many anthropologists would accept.

Another result of Eliade's work has been the common association of shamanism almost exclusively with healing, despite the very clear evidence of specialised practices for aggressive ends, and also the prominence of sexual elements in the rituals. Not least, such traits are so common among the arctic and sub-arctic peoples that it is these, rather than the healing functions, which might actually be said to be typical of shamanism in the circumpolar region. We shall examine a number of case studies below.

There are also political complications with the book, and in modern terms it must be regarded as a highly compromised text. Although partly a work of its time, Eliade's survey of shamanic cultures perpetuates a very clearly primitivist, almost racist view of traditional peoples. They are consistently depicted as being at the 'lower' end of the scale in terms of 'civilisation', and their generally nomadic subsistence strategies are seen to be technologically (and therefore intrinsically) inferior to the settled, agrarian cultures.

In 1965 Åke Hultkrantz first began to develop his concept of religio-ecology, the notion of at least partial environmental determinism in the formation of the arctic belief systems. In this he followed Ohlmarks, but added that the ecological model was dynamic, "changing with climatic fluctuations and historical developments" (1965: 286 and references therein). He was to pursue this line in various parts of the world for the rest of his career (*e.g.* 1978), and it has since become a dominant model in shamanic studies (*e.g.* Pentikäinen 1996a).

In the 1960s, shamanism also began to be incorporated into synthetic studies of religion (*e.g.* Lessa & Vogt 1965; Wallace 1966), with important surveys continuing into the early seventies (Edsman 1967; Motzki 1971; Furst 1974). Even by this time, Eliade's influence was waning among historians of religions, and in a crucial paper from 1973 Åke Hultkrantz proposed a new, generalising definition of shamanism that is still frequently employed today:

> we may define the shaman as a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his [sic] group members
>
> Hultkrantz 1973: 34

The key element of this is the focus on spirits, and on the social role of the shaman, rather than the techniques used to maintain such communication – though Hultkrantz retains the focus on ecstatic experience. Hultkrantz expanded on this work with his comprehensive studies of Native American religion (summarised in 1979b), and continued to enlarge upon his perception of the shamanic complex into the nineties (*e.g.* 1993, 1998).

In 1978 a major contribution to shamanic studies was made by Anna-Leena Siikala, with her thesis on *The rite technique of the Siberian shaman*. This book was in some ways a kind of successor to that of Shirokogorov, in that it focused on the details of the shamanic séance, but her analysis of the neuropsychology of trance states was both new and revelatory. Consisting of a massive compendium of séance descriptions with an analysis of the different kinds of altered states of consciousness that resulted, this work set a pattern of combined neurological and cultural studies of shamanism that is still followed today.

The same emphasis that Hultkrantz placed on spirits as the primary motors of shamanism is also found in the influential work of Ioan Lewis (*e.g.* 1981), who argued that the behaviour of shamans must always be seen in the socio-political context of their surrounding communities. A similar view can be perceived in another suite of work produced in the early 1980s, with Caroline Humphrey's outstanding and nuanced studies of what had happened to shamanic cultures in Siberia under Soviet rule. Her ground-

breaking ethnographic investigations brought new insights into the components of these belief systems (*e.g.* 1980, 1983). In particular, Humphrey's research focused attention on the shaman as one of a plurality of ritual specialists, and examined the transformations that took place in the shamanic belief system when placed under great social pressure (this is continued in her later work, for example her 1996 monograph on the Daur Mongols, written with Urgunge Onon).

In 1989 Lewis published his major monograph on shamanism and spirit possession, collecting his early work and pushing Eliade's definitions of ecstatic religion into new territory. Lewis' book was one of the first mainstream academic works to extend the shamanic definition to a global scale and over vast spans of time – a subject to which we will return below. Atkinson's paper 'Shamanisms today' from 1992 also made an important contribution, in emphasising again the different regional traditions and perceptions that make up varying forms of these belief systems. Even within this broad understanding, Atkinson argues, the meaning of shamanism is entirely a matter of consensus, discussion and continuing redefinition. This extends to terminology, and we can speak equally of 'shamanhood' or 'shamanship', rather than shamanism (cf. Ripinsky-Naxon 1993).

In the 1990s Juha Pentikäinen, who has also contributed much valuable work on the Sámi, re-oriented the shamanic debate again. Much of this material takes an explicitly cognitive line very similar to the perspectives outlined in chapter 1 above, where Pentikäinen proposes yet another definition of shamanism as 'a grammar of mind and body'. In this holistic approach, he emphasises the notion of shamanism as narrative performance, in which the shaman employs a deep knowledge of folklore and traditional learning within a diverse range of social roles. The key element is seen here to be the pact of responsibility entered into by the shaman with her or his community, and with the world of the spirits. This whole complex is encapsulated in the shaman's function as a human repository of the knowledge required for the community to survive – culturally and spiritually as well as literally (1996a, the introduction to which provides a particularly effective survey; 1998; Pentikäinen *et al.* 1998).

Another dimension of this totality of experience was accentuated by Ricketts (1993: 88f), when he wrote of the shaman as a person who embodies the transcendence of boundaries. In the ability to enter the spirit world, the shaman has overcome the limitations of ordinary human life, and achieved a different state of being.

In all this work as in that of the preceding decades, the relationship of shamanic belief systems to their environmental settings remained of central importance (*e.g.* Jacobson's 1993 analysis of a single deity in its ecological context). Alongside this, we can also trace a second strand of enquiry that explores the links between shamanism and another, equally hotly-debated anthropological construct, namely totemism (the classic survey can be found in Lévi-Strauss 1962; see Layton 2000 for a review of this discussion). Though the totemic concept is now rarely employed by anthropologists, the flexible nature of animal-human identities remains a crucial part of any shamanic analysis. The Norse beliefs of this kind have been partly explored in chapter 3 and will be considered further in chapter 6; we shall examine several circumpolar examples below.

Another key theme was the gradual decline of shamanism under various forms of cultural stress, something especially apparent in Siberia under the Soviet regime but occurring to a greater or lesser degree all over the world. The problem of what happened to shamanic societies when the shamanic institution itself began to fade was obvious early on, and had become apparent even by the time of the Jesup expedition. When Jochelson visited the Koryak, for example, he found only two shamans, and it was clear to him that their former power as a professional class was all but gone (1908: 49).

We have already mentioned Caroline Humphrey's ethnographic work in this vein, but several other scholars have also explored the shamanic aftermath. There have been various terms coined for such a phenomenon, equivalent to the 'postshamanism' that Håkan Rydving studied among the Sámi (1987, 1993a). Rane Willerslev (2001: 49), working among the Yukaghirs, writes of a 'shamanistic approach to life', in which the roles and functions of the shaman become secularised but maintained within an approximation of the traditional world-view. Sometimes foreign religious

elements, such as Christianity, can be imposed upon this, but are more often merely adopted in name and adapted to local requirements (see a range of examples in Pentikäinen 1998).

In an example from the more remote past, Glosecki searches for the same patterns among the pagan Anglo-Saxons, with what he calls the 'reflexes' of shamanism. These, he contends, "though fragmentary and widely dispersed, are too pervasive to be explained without reference to a vigorous shamanic tradition current at some point in Germanic prehistory" (Glosecki 1989: 1). For the Viking Age, this phase of shamanic 'half-life' is perhaps what was occurring in the early centuries of the High Medieval period, the time of the sagas' composition.

As the study of northern shamanism has ebbed and flowed in popularity during the last century, three main forms of interpretation have predominated. The Nivkh ethnographer Chuner Taksami, himself an ethnic Siberian and acquainted with several shamans, has perhaps stated it best:

> Shamanism is an historical phenomenon within a system of traditional faiths distinctive of nearly all Siberian peoples. Some people consider shamanism as a variety of primitive religion; others tend to think of it as a set of beliefs and customs centred on the shaman's personality; and others still associate shamanism with witchcraft and magical spells.
>
> Taksami 1998: 14

Retrospective reviews of these changing fashions of interpretation, and more recent responses to them, can be found in the journal *Shaman*, originally published by the International Society for Shamanistic Research, and since 2015 thriving anew as the International Society for Academic Research on Shamanism. The irregular conferences of these organisations also produced a series of influential collections (*e.g.* Diószegi & Hóppal 1978; Hóppal 1984, 2007; Hóppal & von Sadovszky 1989; Hóppal & Pentikäinen 1992; Siikala & Hóppal 1992; Hóppal & Howard 1993; Francfort & Hamayon 2001; Pentikäinen 2001; Hóppal & Kosa 2004; Djaltchinova-Malec 2014). Major synthetic studies have been produced by Saladin d'Anglure (1996), Bowie (2000: 190–218) and T. P. Larsson (2000), alongside two useful overviews (Stutley 2003; Dubois 2009), a Reader (Harvey 2003) and a massive encyclopedic work (Walter & Fridman

2004), with the addition of specifically archaeological explorations (Aldhouse-Green & Aldhouse-Green 2005; Price 2011; Gheorghiu *et al.* 2017).

One major trend however continues to polarise shamanic studies: the question of geographic frames of reference. Even now, echoing the debates of the early twentieth century, some historians of religion strongly resist the use of the term beyond certain regions of central Siberia. In one sense these objections seem baffling, given that the concept of shaman*ism* has always been an external imposition. Quite simply, *it does not exist*, anywhere, not even in Siberia among the Evenki, who have no overall word for what the *šaman* does (though like several other Siberian peoples they have a broad vocabulary for the different components of the shamanic complex).

The concept of shamanism progresses through three phases in its transition from the religion of indigenous peoples to its employment by academics, and this trajectory provides the key to its validity as a category of spiritual phenomena. At the first level, which has only separate indigenous terminologies, this kind of belief system quite simply provides a cartography of reality in the cultures concerned. At the second level is the lexical process by which aspects of these indigenous beliefs are transformed into an anthropological concept – from the *šaman* and other similar figures to the notion of shaman*ism*, as we have seen above. At the third level is the stipulative application of this concept, adapted and interpreted according to circumstance and definition.

Shamanism as an anthropological category is thus entirely invented, and in a sense the word means no more or less than what those who use it decide. However, the same is true for ‘religion’, ‘ritual’, ‘worship’ and all the rest of the terms coined to give meaningful shape to the intangibles of belief. Seen in this way, the use of shamanism as an analytical tool and a comparative vocabulary is no more controversial than any of these other academic categories which have also been the subject of continuous debate for centuries. So long as we understand the implications and frames of reference involved, then shamanism provides us with a useful terminology for describing patterns of ritual behaviour and spiritual beliefs found in strikingly similar form across much of the arctic and sub-arctic regions of

the world. The essential question is whether we can truly speak of shamanism beyond the circumpolar sphere.

It is here that we enter a broader framework of interpretation, which moves outward from Siberia and the circumpolar region on a sliding scale of inclusion to embrace shamanistic traits in the ritual practices of South America, Oceania, Africa (particularly controversially), and ultimately the globe. Four scales of geo-cultural reference are found in shamanic studies, representing three different perspectives on these belief systems:

- the Evenki and some of the Tungus-speaking peoples

  _____

- Siberia
- the circumpolar region: Siberia, (sub)arctic North America, Greenland, northern Fenno-Scandia and the White Sea

  _____

- the entire globe

The first level is exclusive, culturally-specific to those peoples who actually employ the word *šaman*, and has no comparative focus. When the latter is introduced at the second level, a major paradigm shift comes with the acceptance of the shamanic concept as a research tool. The Siberian framework differs from that of the circumpolar region only by degree, as they both incorporate shamanism as an anthropological category within areas of cultural continuity. The next shift comes between the third and fourth levels, because a global platform transforms shamanism from a culturally-situated belief system into a generalising manifestation of human neuro-psychology expressed in localised cultural forms.

There are merits and disadvantages to all these approaches. A focus on the Evenki is unproblematic in one sense, because it deals after all in their own vocabulary of belief and ritual. Even here it is nonetheless important to understand that shamanism is an externally imposed concept. At the global level, a viewpoint of which Piers Vitebsky's work is probably most representative (1995), comes the risk of diluting the shamanic concept

through its adaptation to ever more diverse situations. In many cases this is still rooted in scholarly discussion, but in the broadest and most popular understanding ‘shamanism’ has latterly come to cover virtually any kind of belief in spirits and the existence of other worlds, states of being or planes of consciousness – a definition that of course encompasses the majority of the world’s religions, organised or otherwise, ancient and modern. In this context the term ‘shaman’ has similarly been used to refer to almost any kind of mediator, in any kind of medium, between one perception of the world and another. As a result, those popularly described as shamans have included an astonishing variety of individuals ranging from Jesus to Jim Morrison.

These are not the shamanisms that we shall consider here. Some would argue that this plurality of meaning invalidates the shamanic concept (*e.g.* Näsström 2002a: 61), and that the application of shamanic terminology actually hinders understanding rather than providing it. In fact, the problems of divergent definition in no way disprove the notion of ‘shamanism’ as a consistent cultural response to sensory products of the human nervous system, nor is this watering-down of the term inevitable. Instead I follow the general direction taken by related academic disciplines, as summarised by Mathias Guenther: “the view held generally by scholars in the anthropology of religion and in comparative religion [is] that shamanism is a religious phenomenon that can be formally delineated and differentiated from other, more complex religions” (1999: 426). The vital point is that emphasised by Michel Perrin (1992), and relates to careful definition as the key to the employment of a shamanic metaphor. In this sense, three attitudes can be discerned among those working with the concept of shamanism:

- those who avoid the term entirely
- those who use it uncritically or in a loose sense
- those who use it in a defined sense

If definition is crucial, then we need to examine some of the components of the shamanic world-view, focusing on material relevant to the discussions

of the two preceding chapters. In the following sections we will examine a range of examples, deliberately spread across the circumpolar region to emphasise the comparative links with Scandinavia and the unifying aspects of the arctic cultural sphere.

The shamanic world-view

We can approach this in stages, beginning with cosmology and the tier of worlds, and the axis on which they turn. From this we can move to the spiritual inhabitants of these realms, the idea of animism and the ensouled world.

The World Pillar: shamanism and circumpolar cosmology

The World Tree, the ash Yggdrasill, is perhaps the most easily paralleled element of the Norse cosmology, as the idea of a number of layered realms of existence linked by a single axle is found in many northern religions. Åke Hultkrantz has effectively summarised the common aspects of these beliefs:

> [T]he world tree, a symbolic representation of the sacred centre of the world, … an axis that measures the three main rooms of the world (and their subdivisions into a great plurality of rooms): heaven, earth and underworld. The tree runs through all these worlds, and is a means of communications between them, used by spirits and shamans. In Siberia shamans may have their own trees which are representatives of the world tree, and which they may climb. Sometimes the tree is marked to indicate seven, nine, or up to thirty levels in the sky. … The tree is often crowned by a bird, usually an eagle (like the Russian imperial double eagle in Siberia, the thunderbird in North America). … The tree of life and tree of knowledge are variations of the world tree idea.
>
> Hultkrantz 1996: 42

We have already seen how the Norse worlds extended both above and below the abode of human beings, the nine roots of the tree, and the eagle at the top of Yggdrasill.

Parallels are often sought for the Norse World Tree in Siberia and the Far East, but in fact they can be found much closer to Scandinavia in the Finno-Ugrian cultures of the Baltic littoral. The Great Oak is a creation symbol found particularly in Estonia, where it appears first as an image of destruction and is subsequently cut down to give new life in the form of

objects that spring ready-formed from the tree. The Votes, who lived on the Gulf of Finland around the area of the modern Estonian-Russian border, also believed in the Great Oak, though there it sometimes also appeared as a pine. At the blows of a hero-ancestor's axe, from the trunk of the tree sprung once more the archetypes of various objects, here linked to the cult of the warrior elite:

Lõi lasuu, laiva süntü,	He hit once, a boat was born
lõi tõizõõ, tõinõ süntü.	he hit twice, two boats were born:
Ladvas tiemma lavvikkõisia	from the top we made benches
õhsõis sõtisatulõi	from the branches war-saddles
vääriis õhsõis värttäniit.	from crooked branches distaffs.

Text and translation, Honko *et al* 1994: 101

A similar creation myth, involving saplings around a tree-stump, is found to the east of the Votes, among the Ingrian peoples on the Russian marches (see Honko *et al.* 1994: 99–102).

The same tree is recorded in Karelian traditions, where its branches block the light of the sun and moon, and its shadow brings cold that withers the crops. It is felled as in the other myths, but here the fallen trunk forms a bridge between the worlds to a particularly terrifying aspect of the realm of the dead:

Jo on tammi koatunenne	Now the oak tree had been felled
pikki Pohjoisen jovesta	across Pohjoinen's river
sillaksi ikusijahe	a bridge to the timeless place
männä miehem matkalaisen	for the traveller to go
pimiäh om Pohjolahe	a man to dark Pohjola
miesten syöpähä kylähe	to the man-eating village
urosten uponnehehe.	the village that drowns heroes.

Text and translation, Honko *et al* 1994: 99

In Finland, the leaves of the tree hold the souls of the unborn. A similar version of the tree, in this instance a birch, is found in another Finno-Ugric

culture, that of the Mordvin of Hungary. The birch shuts out the light until it is split, the halves of the trunk falling one to the east and one to the west, continuing the metaphor of a bridge to other places (Honko *et al.* 1994: 97f).

In Eurasian belief the tree is the medium by which the shaman travels from one world to another, climbing its trunk to another plane of existence. Sometimes each world has its own tree, and the realms are linked by a succession of them on top of one another; sometimes each world is a branch from the trunk, or a notch cut into it. In examples with a single tree, the roots become especially important, and it is these that the shaman follows on his or her journeys (the classic work on this is Holmberg [Harva]'s 1923 survey of tree cults; see especially pp. 135–44).

Similar patterns are found in reverse, in relation to the inverted tree. This is also found in Siberia, where it occurs again as a shamanic symbol representing the path of ascent for the shaman's soul to the other worlds, and/or a protection for the shaman's dwelling; the roots are the main paths taken by the travelling spirit (Kagarov 1929; Indian parallels for this are discussed by Coomaraswamy 1938, and Edsman 1944 provides a very broad set of interpretations in primarily Judaeo-Christian and Arabic contexts). In 1999 these arguments were given new lease of chronological life by the unparalleled find of a fully preserved Bronze Age timber circle exposed by shifting sand in the inter-tidal zone at Holme-Next-The-Sea in eastern England. At the centre of the circle an inverted tree had been deliberately driven down into the sand, leaving the roots exposed (Pryor 2001). The discovery of 'Seahenge' has been subject to widely varying interpretations, but the parallels with the tree mythology of the circumpolar region are striking and have been a consistent feature of the excavators' speculations as to the meaning of the monument.

The idea of the World Pillar is another similar concept found in the same region, probably originally separate but later conflated with the tree in many traditions. The pillar was thought to hold up the sky, sometimes combined with an idea of the World Nail which seems to have represented the polar star; if the pillar fell, the world would end (see the range of circumpolar examples in Holmberg 1923: 9–33, 133–46; Tolley also

provides an extensive study of Finnish beliefs in the world support, 1995b). Again the pillar or nail is divided into tiers or levels, which are often conceptualised in a series of ascending stages, and – significantly in a Norse context – these are often nine in number. For example, among the Dolgan of northern Siberia east of the Yenisei their shamans ascend through nine levels of worlds, each represented by wooden images used in the rituals accompanying the spirit journeys (Holmberg 1923: 145, Fig. 50). The neighbouring Yakut people conceptualise their sacrifices to the spirits in a similar way, and tether the animal offerings to a linked series of nine poles symbolising the worlds through which they will pass (*ibid*: 144, Fig. 49).

In some of the Canadian Northwest Coast cultures, the world axis is represented by Cane-Of-The-Sky, a straight reed linking the worlds. It is sometimes symbolised by shamans' staffs, or even carved directly on totem poles. An outstanding example is the Kwahsuh pole erected around 1870 at Angidah on the Nass River, commemorating a chief of the Nisga'a Wolf lineage (Barbeau 1950a: 229–32; Laforet 1992: 48). The base of the pole is formed by Grizzly Bear, holding figures representing All Children of the Grizzly Bear and the People of the Smokehole, surmounted by the totems of Chief of the Wolves and Split Person. The entire upper half of the pole is a representation of the world axis, faceted like a reed, and bracketed at each end by burial boxes for chiefly ancestors to the pole's patron (cf. other poles such as 'Spearing-The-Sky', Barbeau 1950b: 445).

In other areas the pillar and tree are combined, or made of other materials such as stone or metal. Sometimes the pillar extends into the underworld, or in some cases it is only there, supporting the living worlds above it. In still other cultures it rests on the body of a supernatural being. The pillar is conceptualised as the main pole of a house, carrying the weight of the sky like a roof.

Holmberg's work on these beliefs has been recently analysed by Åke Hultkrantz in a 1996 essay, with an excellent history of research in this field (*ibid*: 32ff). Hultkrantz also makes a complete survey of these beliefs in the circumpolar and Eurasian area, comparing the pillar with the tree, and arriving at the following cultural distribution for each category (*ibid*: 35):

- *Europe*
  - World Tree: Cheremisses, Karelians, Mordvin, Viking-Age Scandinavians, Votes
  - World Pillar: Finns
  - Both tree and pillar: Estonians, Sámi, Samoyeds

- *Asia*
  - World Tree: Tungus
  - World Pillar: Ainu, Altai, Buryats, Dolgans, Mansi, Mongols, Orotchi, Teleuts, Yakuts
  - Both tree and pillar: Khanty

- *North America*
  - World Tree: Timucua
  - World Pillar: Creek, Great Basin Numic, Haida, Hare, Inuit, Kalispel, Kaska, Nuxalk, Okanagon, Omaha, Sanpoil, Tahltan, Thompson Indians, Tlingit, Tshimshian
  - Both tree and pillar: Delaware, Kwakwaka'wakw, Plains tribes

These comparisons are of course at a relatively coarse level, obscuring the regional differences in the mythologies. However, closer inspection reveals an astonishing correspondence between the cosmological beliefs of widely geographically separated areas. We can take a single example of this, in the work of Karl Schlesier on Tsistsista (Cheyenne) religion on the northern American Plains. Produced in collaboration with Tsistsista *maheonhetaneo*, 'persons working for the sacred', this is a very careful piece of research in which Schlesier deliberately highlights the range of ritual specialists and uses the indigenous terms for them. He published a nuanced, carefully considered study of a people's conceptions of the holy, using 'shamanism' when appropriate to describe elements common in circumpolar belief, and discarding it when not. As part of this study he compared Tsistsista spiritual practices with those of the northern Siberian peoples, and noted some 108 *directly* identical features (Schlesier 1987: 45–9). It must be stressed that

these were not vague concepts, such as worshipping the sun, but specifics: the centre of the spirit lodge in which ceremonies are performed has a pole symbolising the World Tree, on which seven divisions are marked; the vault of heaven is conceptualised as a kettle; the crane is a sacred bird of the world above, and so on.

As Hultkrantz emphasises (1996: 43), although the pillar and tree are found in some Middle Eastern cultures, it is almost universal in the far north and would also seem to fit this area better. The idea of the long arctic night turning on the axis of the pole star, in a landscape of endless trees or snow, is a perfect environment from which such a view of the cosmos could have emerged. He also argues for a very ancient tradition for this concept:

> The world pillar, we may insist, genuinely represents an archaic, circumpolar world-view. Since circumpolar culture, besides being an adaptation to the Arctic and sub-Arctic environment, typifies a culture of mesolithic-palaeolithic origins it seems probable that the world pillar and associated mythic-ritual complex may be traced back to this time and age.
>
> Hultkrantz 1996: 43

We shall return below to the idea of shamanism as the ‘primal religion’, but for now we can merely note the unquestionable circumpolar context of the Norse cosmology, and remember all the links that we have seen between the world of Yggdrasill and the sorcerous practices of Óðinn. From the form of these worlds, we can move on to their inhabitants and examine the spirit population of the circumpolar region.

The ensouled world

For most of the Siberian peoples, as well as those of the Canadian and Greenlandic arctic, their physical environment was filled by uncountable spirits of different kinds – some hostile, some benevolent, other monstrous beyond description (a useful overview is presented by the papers in Yamada & Irimoto 1997; for the spirits’ appearance in different cultural contexts see Bogoraz 1904–9: 285–307, who includes Chukchi sketches of some of these beings, and Rasmussen 1929 for similar East Greenland Inuit drawings of trance visions, a number of which are also reproduced in Gilberg 1993 and Vitebsky 1995; Fig. 5.6).



Fig. 5.6 A drawing by Kârale Andreassen, an Inuit from east Greenland, depicting the visions of his father who was a shaman. Here the helping spirit Âjumâq, whose touch brings death, is entering a dwelling. The shamans standing on the sleeping pallets are trying to keep the spirit under control (from the collections of the National Museum of Denmark, København).

These spirits were thought to be present as a form of consciousness residing in all things – whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral. These represent the 'essence' of the thing in question, embodying the qualities that make the thing what it is. Thus a bear spirit is big and fierce, while that of a mouse is small and timid, but has other characteristics like being able to go into tiny spaces where a bear spirit could not (cf. Vitebsky 1995: 12ff). Within the shamanic world-view objects too can be conceived of in this way, so the spirit of a knife cuts, the spirit of a pot contains, and so on. These spirits lead their own independent lives with their own needs and emotions, but can also interact with humans in both positive and negative ways. They are a fundamental part of the cosmic harmony, in effect a sort of sentient ecology, and form an integral part of the structure which the

shamans must engage with on their journeys between the worlds. This combined network of supernatural forces forms a kind of sacred geography, in which the habitus of the community embodies spatial perceptions with spiritual meaning (see Jordan 2001a for an example of this among the Khanty).

In a completely literal sense this spirit world, and the fluidity of form within it, was omnipresent throughout the circumpolar area, and manifested constantly in material culture. A classic description of this conception of reality was recorded by Bogoraz during his exile in north-eastern Siberia in the late 1800s, when a Chukchi shaman made the following statement:

> On the steep bank of a river there exists life. A voice is there, and speaks aloud. I saw the 'master' of the voice and spoke with him. He subjected himself to me and sacrificed to me. He came yesterday and answered my questions. The small grey bird with the blue breast sings shaman-songs in the hollow of the bough, calls her spirits, and practices shamanism. The wood-pecker strikes his drum in the tree with his drumming nose. Under the axe the tree trembles and wails as a drum under the baton. All these came at my call.
>
> All that exists lives. The lamp walks around. The walls of the house have voices of their own. Even the chamber-vessel has a separate land and house. The skins sleeping in the bags talk at night. The antlers lying on the tombs arise at night and walk in procession round the mounds, while the deceased get up and visit the living.
>
> Original text (not quoted here) in Bogoraz 1900: 385; translation in Bogoraz 1904–9: 281

The shaman clearly depicts the ensouled world as part of a shamanic whole, with each spirit 'drumming' and 'shamanising' in harmony with his own rituals. We see the 'master' of the spirits, the classic 'Owner' or 'ruler' figure, and the shaman's negotiations with him.

The skins and bags referred to by the shaman were thought to turn back into reindeer at night, and had their own 'ruler'. The trees in the forest, each one personified as one of the 'people of wood', talked to each other. Even the shadows in the huts had tribes, and subsisted by hunting the light (Bogoraz 1904–9: 281). This concept of spiritual life extended into every aspect of experience – even the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms was accompanied by the 'mushroom men', spirits who would appear and guide the dreamer to new and different places (Bogoraz collected sketches

drawn by Chukchi who had eaten the mushrooms, tracing the path along which these spirits had led them; *ibid*: 282f).

The spirits could also represent other aspects of life, such as sickness. A common idea all across the circumpolar region is the understanding of illness as an attack by a hostile being, which must be fought in order to cure the person afflicted. This could happen in many ways, but a typical example comes again from the Chukchi. When treating a sick person, Chukchi shamans first transformed the illness into some other form, and then transformed themselves into something appropriate with which to fight it or drive it away. Thus a sickness of the stomach might be changed into a bay of the sea, and the shaman would then become rough waves to wash the beach clean. More elaborately still, a swollen limb could be transformed into a mound of snow, whereupon the shaman would change into a sturgeon, flopping about on the snow and cutting it up with his fins, and thereby relieving the pressure of the swelling (Bogoraz 1904–9: 477, 500–5).

The same was true for protection against spirits, such as the evil *ke'let* whom the Chukchi believed hunted humans for food. A shaman would create spirit-bears or monsters to guard a hut, or transform the building itself into iron, sharp enough to cut an intruder. Alternatively the *ke'let*'s intended victim could be hidden safely away inside an animal (a reindeer's ear or anus were favourite spots). Sometimes entire spirit landscapes were created – so a line drawn in the snow would be seen by the *ke'let* as an impenetrable mountain range (*ibid*: 475f, 498ff).

Other, related types of spirit concepts are also found among the Yukaghir in the idea of 'personhood', an acknowledgement that human and animal souls have a degree of interchangeability, to the extent that such anthropomorphic terminology is almost irrelevant (Willerslev 2001: 44f; this is expanded upon in Willerslev 2007). Human relationships with animals, and in particular whether they regard them as 'persons' or not, are flexible and governed by circumstance and context, and the link between personhood and the body is highly complex:

> [A]lthough we might talk about an anthropomorphic essence of a spiritual type (the three souls and the capacity for rational consciousness) common to humans and non-humans alike, actual

manifestations of these essential qualities are species dependent. For instance … foxes (“*caxa’le*”) are said to be sly, deceitful creatures, who take great pleasure in causing other species suffering, and keep dirty households. In contrast, moose (“*pie’je*”) are generally friendly and tidy, although slightly dull. Our notion of personhood, however, has to be expanded to include physiological aspects as well as mental ones. Each species has its own kind of body (“*’cul*”) and odour (“*yo’rula*”), both of which are integral aspects of their status as persons. Movement and smell are part of the Yukaghirs’ notion of personhood, and are important for deciding what species they are dealing with. … Animals, while being capable of taking the bodily shape of humans, are said to often retain some of their former physical qualities, which identify them as beings of a special class, who act in a human way, but still do so differently from mankind. Hence, Fox-woman keeps her strong smell, and Bear-man keeps his jog-trot way of moving.

Willerslev 2001: 45

The same kinds of patterns were also found in other circumpolar areas, such as the Canadian Northwest Coast. As with the Norse and Sámi soul beliefs, here there were important links between the spirit world, the ancestors, and the very nature of human beings themselves. Within the shamanic world-view particular to the region, a person traced their identity through their family line to the continuous chain of ancestors stretching back into the past, and especially to those ancestors’ successive negotiated relationships with supernatural beings. Usually appearing in animal form, it is these entities that appear as the ‘totems’ displayed in all the visual media of material culture available to the Northwest Coast peoples, and above all on the totem poles standing in front of every dwelling. The various tribes had different categorisation systems for their clans, but broadly similar in their relationship to the spirit world: the Haida had two clan groups, Ravens and Eagles; the Tsimshian had four phratries, Eagle, Frog/Raven, Wolf and Killer-Whale; the Gitxsan substituted the Fireweed phratry for the Killer Whale, and so on along the coast (Laforet 1992: 13).

The tiers of totem beings on the poles thus represent the collective spiritual assets of the family, expressed through all their ancestors’ supernatural alliances. These associations in turn linked to the domains over which these spirits ruled, the familiar concept of ‘Owners’. The poles therefore served an additional role as manifest claims to resource-rich territory, articulated through myths of ancestral achievement.

These stories were also enacted in ritual dramas, not the least of which were the famous potlatch ceremonies which continue today. The focus at all

these occasions was on the notion of ‘witnessed histories’, known as *adawk*, ensuring that the everyone in the community was aware of their own nature, and of how to behave in their dealings with both the ancestral and supernatural worlds (Laforet 1992: 6, 10–13). The potlatch gifts were simultaneously payment for the act of witnessing, and a potential obligation to later testify to what the witness had seen and heard. It is important to emphasis that aggression and conflict were crucial elements in the potlatch, in the sense that even (or especially) enemy tribes were invited to feast. This symbolism of fighting was maintained throughout the proceedings, and even when a marriage was celebrated it was expressed in terms of warfare and rivalry (Rosman & Rubel 1971: 206).

It is in this context that the well-known masking traditions of the Northwest Coast operated. Some of the masks represent the culture-heroes and famous beings common to all the coastal and riverine tribes – the Trickster beings Raven (on the north coast), Mink and Blue Jay (central and southern coasts), and other entities such as Thunder, Moon, Wild Man, Echo, the How Hows, and the Thunderbird. Masks were also used to dramatise the individual supernatural relationships of the clan ancestors. Each tribe had slightly different masking traditions, and a few did not use masks at all, but all were united in this general understanding of their world (the literature on Northwest Coast masks is vast, but see Wardwell 1996: 108–63 for an overview, and Wyatt 1994, 1999, 2012 for modern legacies).

That these masking traditions, and the ancestral stories to which they allude, may be of very great antiquity indeed is attested to by remarkable Tsimshian finds from Metlakatla near Prince Rupert and Kitkatla. In the late nineteenth century two *stone* masks of unknown date were collected there, each representing a human face, one blind and one sighted (Duff 1975: 160–7; Ruddell 1995: 44). The latter mask fits perfectly inside the former, suggesting that they were probably worn together and shown sequentially, in a similar fashion to the transformation masks of more recent centuries. The image of a blind human becoming sighted brings to mind the myth of how Raven stole the Light from Sky Chief, scattering its fragments to become the sun, moon and stars, and thereby bringing illumination to the world (Reid & Bringhurst 1988). The earliest known Raven images date to

*c.*1000 BC, again from the Prince Rupert area, suggesting that his role as the Trickster culture-hero of the Northwest Coast is one of the oldest-known shamanic traditions in the world.

Among the Tlingit and Tsimshian, the small spirit-helpers of the shamans could be represented by appropriately miniaturised masks (several examples are known, such as the Tlingit ones collected around 1900: CMC VII-A-30/31). Everyday items could also be carved with shamanic motifs, linking to the activities of the shaman but used by ordinary people (Wardwell 1996 presents a range of examples; see also MacDonald 1996: ch. 3 for Haida shamanic artefacts). Tsimshian fish-hooks, for example, were sometimes decorated with the image of a spirit that would help to bait the fish, chosen with the help of the fishing-shamans (Kirby *et al.* 1995).

When the full repertoire of Northwest Coast material culture is considered, we therefore see a totality of representation combining all the elements that were central to defining personal identity: the clan, helping spirits, shamanic power, ancestors, supernatural beings friendly to the family, and economic claims for land use.

Joining all these, again at the heart of a shamanic view of reality, was the soul itself. On the Northwest Coast the notion of communal souls was widespread, not just between human beings but also shared with animals (especially fish, the main source of protein and the key to subsistence in the region). All ‘animals’ – the totems represented on the poles and emblems of clan identity – were thought to live in their own separate worlds, with access points from this world in the sea, the air, the rivers and the other major habitats of the rocky coast of Northwest Canada. In their own realms these beings appeared as humans, and only took on their animal forms when visiting our plane of existence. Many of the myths of the Northwest Coast concern journeys by human shamans or heroes to these respective worlds, meeting the ‘animals’ in their own villages. The latter usually resembled those of the humans themselves, with the same kinds of houses, boats and material culture, all set in a similar landscape. When the ‘animals’ were hunted in the human world, the task of the shamans was to ensure the respectful return of their souls to their own worlds, where they would be reborn. The familiar cycle of shamanic rituals and negotiations designed to

ensure the continued maintenance of the community can be recognised from all the cultures discussed here.

The ultimate symbol of this world-view, and one which can be found in many situations on the coast, was the cedar-wood box. A great many of these carved and decorated chests survive from the last few centuries, and the tradition of making them continues today (see Wardwell 1996: 300– 7; MacDonald 1996: 118–27). They were used for many purposes, including the storage of food, ceremonial regalia, and not least shamanic tools (see below). They were also used as containers for human burials, essentially a kind of coffin. At the ultimate level there are stories among the Tsimshian and Haida of the entire universe conceived as a Box of Souls in which all the spirits of ‘animals’ and ‘people’ are contained.

We must bear this in mind with a background of the Norse soul beliefs – the *fylgjur*, *hamingur* and so on – and their relationship to patterns of sorcery. To these we may add the *verðir* and *gandir*, the spirits attracted by the *varðlok(k) ur*, and other, more potent beings such as the *dísir* and *landvættir*. From these inhabitants of the shamanic world, we can move on to those who communicated with them, the shamans themselves.

The shamanic vocation

The process of becoming a shaman often involved a process of initiation, either voluntary or involuntary. This could take a long time – even years in some cases – and might involve long-term sickness and temporary madness, or more short-term trials such as fasting or various forms of ordeal and tests of endurance. In several of the Siberian cultures, while dreaming or in a state of trance the shaman's spirit form is dismembered by other spirits and reduced to a skeleton, before being re-assembled using new body-parts specially adapted to perform the shaman's duties (such as 'new' eyes to do what normal people cannot, and see into the other realities which surround our own). The shaman also needed to learn the sacrificial rituals necessary to appease the spirits – a detailed accumulation of knowledge taught by one generation of shamans to the next. The literature on shamanic initiations is very great, but useful overviews may be found in Vitebsky (1995: 59–63), Czaplicka (1914: 178– 90) and Shirokogorov (1935: 344–58).

We know little of the process by which Norse sorcerers gained their powers, though as we have seen in chapter 3 the written sources give us tantalising hints. While we shall not dwell on this aspect of shamanism here due to the relative lack of Scandinavian data, it is worth noting that what we have fits well with the circumpolar complex. In the Viking Age too we seem to have sorcerers passing on their skills to a younger generation, people going to be taught by specialists (often among the Sámi), knowledge passing in families, and magical skills revealed or conferred in dreams, trances and ecstatic experiences.

Equally important is the concept of different types of shamans, each with their own roles and functions, and the operation of these people alongside other forms of ritual specialist in the same communities. In Siberia, the different categories of shaman in the main cultural groups have been reviewed by Czaplicka (1914: 191–202). It is here we find the differing concepts such as 'family' and 'professional' shamans (among the Koryak), ecstatic shamans, shaman-prophets and incantation shamans (among the Chukchi), and the 'white' and 'black' shamans found among

many of Siberian peoples. By way of example, we can focus on a few of the Siberian peoples and the tribes of the Canadian Northwest Coast.

Collectively, shamans among the Chukchi were known as *enenilit*, 'those with spirits'. They could be both male and female, though the powers of women shamans were considered inferior. Up to one third or one quarter of the community were belived to possess some measure of shamanic abilities (Bogoraz 1904–9: 413–16). In other areas of Siberia the pattern was the opposite, and when Krasheninnikov visited Kamchatka in the eighteenth century he recorded that female shamans were the most common and also the most powerful (1764: 85).

The Siberian cultures in general afforded women a remarkably low status, even by the standards of historical inequality (Bogoraz' descriptions of Chukchi women emphasise this especially, recording the frequency of female suicides due to the sheer hardship of their lives; 1904–9: ch. 18). In this context it is important to consider the fact of female shamans, which in many cases were considered more powerful and worthy of respect than their male equivalents. The shamanic calling clearly provided women with what Hutton has called "exceptional opportunities to undertake public roles" (2001: 109).

Chukchi shamans were of three primary types, each with a precise sphere of activity and summarised with a specific terminology:

- *kalatkourgin*, one who 'communicates with spirits'
- *hetolatirgin*, one who is 'looking into' (*i.e.* clairvoyance, divination, seeking the hidden)
- *ewganva-tirgin*, one who 'produces incantations' (*i.e.* operative sorcery)

The shamans were paid, but unlike other Siberian peoples the ritual specialists of the Chukchi did not have their own, secret language (Bogoraz 1904–9: 417).

Just as we have seen in some of the Sámi sources, the practice of every household owning a drum was also found among the Chukchi, Koryak and Yukaghir (Czaplicka 1914: 170). The fact that one or more members of every family was capable of communication with the spirits, often through

personal songs and drum rhythms, did not work against the presence of full shamans in the same communities. Some tasks could only be undertaken by those with this greater level of power, and in this way the entire community was bound together by the same relationship to the supernatural.

Their rituals were most often performed in darkness. In the light of the Norse and Sámi traditions it is interesting to note that assistants played a major role, sitting in a circle and helping the shaman achieve contact with other realities. As trance was achieved, the Chukchi described the shaman as ‘sinking back’ (Bogoraz 1904–9: 413, 441, 448). This is exactly the same term used of the *volur* in *Voluspá* and other Eddic poems.

The most common material items used were ‘charms’, a very broad group of objects that could take almost any form, united by their conceptualisation as the guardians of the shaman and the community. They often took the form of carved or cast figures, either in animal shape, anthropomorphic, or therianthropic. The Chukchi also used drums, and had a rich tradition of shamanic songs. Masks were also used, though not in the actual process of ‘shamanising’, for which dolls representing helping spirits were employed instead (*ibid*: 341–8, 356ff, 361f, 366f; a range of rituals is described in Bogoraz’ ch. 14).

The notion of sorcerous dualism was also a common feature of Siberian shamanism, the division of its rituals into ‘black’ and ‘white’ strands corresponding very broadly to positive and negative social functions. It is now often hard to tell to what degree the binary oppositions found in the early ethnographies genuinely reflected the practices of Siberian spirituality – the emphasis on good and evil, night and daytime, and so on – but this terminology of ritual is still in common anthropological use (*e.g.* Vitebksy 1995).



Fig. 5.7 Front and back view of a Yakut shaman's costume (after Birket-Smith 1933: 30).

Among the Yakut, the male (*aïy-oïuna*) and female (*aïyudagana*) white shamans would undertake rituals to improve human fertility, to cleanse the waters of fishing grounds and generally to provide services to the

community (Czaplicka 1914: 195; Fig. 5.7). Several observers recorded that the black shamans (*abassy-oïuna*) were only ‘professionally’ bad, and that this affiliation reflected no more than the fact that they gained their power from negotiations with the forces of evil and darkness, unlike the white shamans who did the opposite. Troshchanski (1902: iii), for example, noted that the black shamans helped people just as much as their white counterparts. In his division of *seiðr* into ‘black’ and ‘white’ forms, Strömbäck (1935: ch. 3) makes the same point that although the objectives of the former are almost exclusively concerned with the projection of misfortune, the rituals by which this was acheived seem little different from non-violent sorcery.

It was also clear that the among the Yakut the black sorcerers were regarded as far more powerful than the white. Both kinds of shamans were also graded as to the skills they could master, with three levels of competence (Sieroszewski 1896: 628). Among the Buryat were found shamans who had inherited their powers and those of the first generation, also ‘real’ and ‘false’ shamans, and white and black sorcerers. The Votyak had ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ shamans, while the Samoyeds seem to have made no distinctions at all among their ritual specialists. In some places the balance between the different kinds of shamans shifted, and Czaplicka noted that by the early years of the twentieth century the Yakut had almost no white sorcerers left, while among the Votyak the pattern was the reverse (1914: 194f).

Alongside all these types of shamans, there were also other types of ritual specialist. The Yakut, for example, had individuals called *aptah-kisi*, whose role was tell special kinds of stories, relating the spiritual relationships of the community and its shamans. The Altai people had four kinds of specialists beyond the *kam* shamans (Czaplicka 1914: 200):

- *rynchi*, ‘who, during attacks accompanied by pain, could foretell the future’
- *telgochi*, ‘guessers’
- *yarinchi*, ‘those who can divine by means of shoulder-blade bones’
- *yadachi*, ‘those who can control the weather by means of a stone’

The work of Caroline Humphrey in this field has already been mentioned above, but we can also take up the example of Nepalese spiritual practitioners, dominated by two different types who have been termed shamans and lineage mediums, each with their respective spheres of influence, which are in turn linked to spatial perceptions (Walter 2001).

There are obvious points of comparison between the Siberian ritual specialists and the long terminologies of sorcerers that we have encountered among the Norse and Sámi. Scandinavian sorcery is seen in a new light, and the patterns observed there appear typical of the circumpolar region, rather than as curious Viking-Age anomalies. Strömbäck was especially interested in the notion of black and white shamanism, and its applicability to the interpretation of *seiðr* (1935: ch. 3). Here he interpreted 'divinatory *seiðr*' as the counterpart to Siberian white sorcery, and most other forms as typifying 'black *seiðr*' – the latter with special reference to the abilities of Óðinn.

As we have seen, the Norse and Sámi sources also contain several references to special physical qualities possessed by sorcerers, especially curious aspects of their appearance. The same pattern is found in Siberia, and was recorded by a number of ethnographers independently of each other. A typical example is found in Sieroszewski's description of a sixty-year-old Yakut shaman called Tiuspiut ('Fallen From The Sky'), who had gained his powers in his early thirties and even in his advanced years was said to be thin, muscular and with immense stamina that enabled him to dance his rituals for an entire night:

> During the shamanistic ceremonies his eyes had a strange expression of madness, and a pertinacious stare, which provoked to anger and excitement those on whom his look rested. This is the second shaman with such strange eyes whom I have met in the district of Yakut. Generally in the features of a shaman there is something peculiar which enabled me, after a short experience, to distinguish them from the other folk present.
>
> Sieroszewski 1896: 396

Almost exactly the same was recorded by Bogoraz during his work with the Chukchi for the Jesup expedition, but he also noted what the people themselves thought about it:

The eyes of a shaman have a look different from that of other people, and they explain it by the assertion that the eyes of the shaman are very bright (*nikeraqen*), which, by the way, gives them the ability to see 'spirits' even in the dark. It is certainly a fact that the expression of a shaman is peculiar … and it is often possible to pick him out from among many others.

Bogoraz 1904–9: 116

Other writers referred to these qualities again and again, often commenting on the generally unsettling nature of the shamans right across Siberia – that they were people in whose presence it was difficult to be comfortable, whose glance was best avoided, even that they possessed a strangely disturbing beauty. It is easy, of course, to suspect a degree of suppressed homoeroticism in the responses of some of the male Europeans who came to Siberia from a very different world, but this cannot account for more than a small proportion of the descriptions. We should think here of the sharp teeth of the Sámi shamans, and there is also a parallel in the sagas.

In chapter 3 we have already mentioned Gunnarr Hámundarson being seen sitting happily in his barrow, in *Njáls saga* 78. Several people have nocturnal visions of the mound opening, while Gunnarr sits inside and turns towards the moon. This may be an important element of the scene, as the effect of moonlight on the faces of the undead is a curious and unexplained theme in several of the sagas with supernatural elements. A good example is the unsettling episode in *Grettis saga* (35), when at the moment of death the revenant killer Glamr stares up at the moon with an expression that is declared by Grettir to be 'the only sight he ever saw which frightened him'. These episodes may be purely for dramatic effect, but the focus on their eyes is remarkable nonetheless.

Just as elsewhere in the circumpolar belt, on the Northwest Coast the various nations also possessed different types of ritual specialist, including several forms of shaman, adapted to the needs of the community and specific environmental contingencies. With slight variation from people to people, three main categories of shaman can be distinguished, each with appropriate functions:

- Curing shamans
  - helped the sick and fought for the recovery of lost or stolen souls

    - often fought the effects of evil shamans and ‘witches’
    - could make a diagnosis, and then decide whether to proceed based upon the risk involved to the shaman
    - characterised by extensive material culture for use in the rituals, especially rattles
- Fishing shamans
    - ensure continued cycle of spawning and migration for the fish in the coastal rivers
    - special function of welcoming the ‘First Salmon’, to encourage the fish to return each year
    - characterised by extensive material culture for use in the rituals
    - surrounded by a great many myths and ancestral narratives
- War shamans
    - forecast the outcome of battle, and determined favourable circumstances for its prosecution
    - made predictions about violent events through divination rituals
    - could control the weather

In addition to the specific functions listed above, the shamans could also generally attract game, see events happening far away, and predict the future. We may also add a fourth category of Witches, specialising in destructive sorcery and the infliction of harm (for a Tsimshian example, see the ‘Witchcraft narrative’ recorded at Giludzao, in Cove & MacDonald 1987: 153ff). In their relationship both to the shamans proper and to society in general, the ‘witches’ of the Northwest Coast have many parallels with the *ilisitsut* of the Inuit (Merkur 1987) and the *yenaldloshi*, the so-called Navajo Wolves or ‘skinwalkers’ of the American Southwest (Kluckhohn 1994). Similar points of comparison may be made with the aggressive sorcery of the Chukchi (see below, and Bogoraz 1904–9). We should remember in this context the category of specific and derogatory ‘witch’ terms in the Old Norse sources.

Northwest Coast shamans could be male or female, though the former tended to predominate. We see again the familiar pattern of spiritual power

received, often involuntarily, either in dreams or through encounters with supernatural beings (Figs 5.8 & 5.9). Among the Haida, long-dead shamans could choose their successors, speaking to them from the spirit world, and preparing them by ‘making a hole in their minds’ (Swanton 1905: 311, in ‘Story of the shaman, G.a’ndox’s father’). Shamans served apprenticeships, and were in part elected by their communities. Unlike many of the Siberian cultures, on the Northwest Coast the role of shaman could be seen as actively attractive – there are even stories of small children playing at being shamans, ‘curing’ each other and so on (Cove & MacDonald 1987: 113, ‘Shaman’s narrative’; see also the Haida tales of shamans collected in Bringhurst 1999, 2000, 2001).





Fig. 5.8 Carved figure of a shaman from Haida Gwaai (photo Wellcome Trust, Creative Commons).

Their special equipment took various forms, but most often centred on bearskin robes, aprons of leather and blankets decorated with totem animals, and ‘crowns’ of grizzly bear claws; some female shamans used labrets (lip ornaments). We also find very elaborate necklaces of claws and deer horns, the penis bones of bears (a striking parallel to the Sámi drum amulets here) and various charms made of animal bone, fur and skin (Fig. 5.10). Animal body parts, such as deer hooves used to form a hanging fringe on a robe, were employed to gain the strength or agility of the animal in question. Painted designs on clothing were oriented so as to be seen best by the wearer rather than an observer, serving as sources of power and inspiration for the shaman, a link with his or her totem animals (Rockwell 1991; Wardwell 1996: 164–216, 282–98; Ruddell 1995: 46).





Fig. 5.9 A female shaman from Kispiox village, Haida Gwaai (after Cove & MacDonald 1987: 108; photo G. T. Emmons).



Fig. 5.10 Ritual paraphernalia collected from a Sheena River shaman (after Cove & MacDonald 1987: 125; photo Field Museum, Chicago).

Northwest Coast shamans used drums, rattles, dolls, sucking tubes to draw out or inject sickness and evil, and a large array of charms. Cutting instruments were also common, as were miniature means of transport such

as small wooden canoes, which would help the shaman travel to other worlds. They also wore masks, though not usually while performing shamanic ritual (this especially applies to the Tsimshian and Haida). Many shamans also carried a staff, of special interest in the light of the Nordic staffs (Fig. 5.11). Made of wood and varying in size from about a metre to approximately shoulder-high, the staffs were made of wood and served as symbols of authority. Usually very slim, most of those that survive today are either undecorated or very simply ornamented with carvings of spirit helpers. The primary symbolic dimension of the staff was as a metaphor for the world axis, the Cane-Of-The-Sky that as we have seen also appears on totem poles (Wardwell 1996: 218–80).

As we have seen among the Norse, the staff could also have other, more directly human overtones. This sexual symbolism was also an integral part of circumpolar ritual as it was among the Sámi and the Viking-Age Scandinavians, and similarly embedded within a complex network of gender constructions. We can now consider these, and their correspondences with the practitioners of *seiðr*.

Gender and sexual identity

To a Western public, the most startling aspect of the Jesup expedition's reports concerned the clear evidence for what even then was described as a 'third or neutral sex' among the Siberians, in particular connected with shamanism. As part of the process of becoming a shaman, this recreation of the self that we have seen above, the individual often crossed the normally acceptable gender boundaries of his or her society, frequently taking on the dress or lifestyle of the opposite sex. This could be either temporary or permanent, and with varying degrees of impact on the sexual orientation of the shaman. The experience was often exceedingly traumatic, and responsible for a great many suicides.

These concepts were soon taken up in Western literature, especially works on homosexuality (eg. Westermarck 1909: 368f, 378f). One of the first subsequent studies of these gender constructions was in Czaplicka's monograph on *Aboriginal Siberia* (1914: ch. 7), and the devotion of a whole chapter to the sexual aspects of shamanism placed the work far ahead of its time.

Among the classic examples of this from the early literature are the so-called ‘soft men’ of the Chukchi, described by Bogoraz (1904–9: 449–55, including his famous depiction of Tilu’wgi, a shaman of this kind). This term, which was the ethnographer’s translation from the Chukchi *yirka-lául*, was until relatively recently applied beyond Siberia as a category similar to the ‘berdaches’ of North America; these wider meanings have been much contested, and the use of ‘berdache’ in particular is now generally avoided as a perjorative (see Lang 1998: xi–xvii).



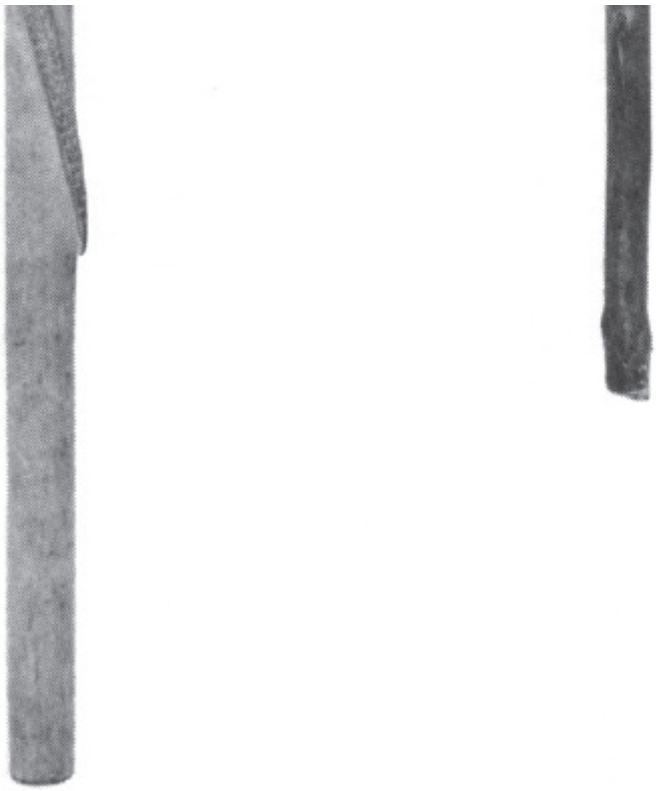


Fig. 5.11 Shamans' staffs collected on the Skeena River in 1892 (after Cove & MacDonald 1987: 265; photo Field Museum, Chicago).

Among the Chukchi the process of 'soft man being', by which a shaman was transformed into a *yirka-lául*, was usually dreaded; some men preferred death to obeying the command of their spirits (Bogoraz 1904–9: 450). The transformation could take several forms, and a shaman did not always progress through all of them. The first was a change of hairstyle, from male to female fashion. This was adopted by shamans, but also occasionally by the sick, with the intention of confusing the spirits of illness who would mistake them for someone else. The second phase was the adoption of female dress, though male patterns of social behaviour were retained. The third phase involved the complete adoption of female habits, including sexual congress, cohabitation and marriage with men. All three types of *yirka-lául* retained their male names, but they acquired special spirits appropriate to their new gender identity (*ibid*: 450–2).

The 'soft men' were regarded as the most powerful of all, and Bogoraz observed that, "the people are extremely afraid of the transformed, much

more so than of ordinary shamans" (1904–9: 451, 453). At the same time, they were hated and the objects of scorn, though this was never expressed to their faces for fear of the consequences. Hutton (2001: 109) has speculated that Bogoraz may here have been projecting his own homophobia onto Chukchi attitudes, but this combination of fear, repellence and respect is found in other shamanic cultures too and should not be lightly dismissed as a product of twentieth-century prejudice.

This notion of social extremity bringing with it an increase in shamanic power may also help to explain another aspect of the Old Norse descriptions of sorcery. As we have seen, there are numerous written accounts of Nordic peoples turning (or being forbidden to turn) to the Sámi for ritual help, and we should ask why they should need to if they had their own 'shamans'. Here again we can find circumpolar parallels, as with Bogoraz' observation (1904–9: 459) that the Chukchi regarded shamans from *outside* their own culture as being especially powerful, and that they were by preference consulted for particularly difficult tasks.

The shamans of transformed gender could also take a different guise. In very rare cases, a female equivalent to the 'soft men' was encountered among the Chukchi, though their existence has only been recorded secondhand. These women seem to have adopted only the third form of transformation, taking on male dress and behaviour, using spears and other weapons, and cohabiting sexually with women in the social role of a man. Bogoraz was told that they used sexual aids to simulate the male genitalia, emphasising how far the change of gender extended within this construction of shamanic identity (1904–9: 455f).

The same phenomenon of 'soft men' was found further south in Kamchatka. Steller wrote that almost every man among the Kamchadal (Itelmen) and the Koryak had a wife and a *koyekchuch*, a man who dressed and acted as a woman (1774: 289, 350). Another visitor to the region, Krashennikov (1819: 158), recorded the same term and behaviour, while nearly a century later Jochelson collected stories of them but found none still alive (1908: 52–3). Similar patterns were reported from the Kadyak islands by Saritchev (1811: 33), who had visited them as part of the Billings expedition. Unfortunately, with the exception of Jochelson all these writers

focused their attention on the ‘shocking’ fact of the same-sex relationships rather than any spiritual dimension to them, so it is uncertain to what extent they were reflections of shamanic power.

In his work with the Yukaghirs, Jochelson found nothing resembling a category of transformed shamans, but he did encounter male shamans who dressed in female attire (1926: 193ff). A similar phenomenon was recorded by Sieroszewski among the Yakut (Sakha), where he interpreted it in the light of the great respect afforded to female shamans (1896: 631). Jochelson thought that both examples could be seen as an inland echo of the Chukchi’s ‘soft men’ in the east, something resembling the second phase of ‘soft man being’. It may be significant however that the Yukaghir and Sakha did not regard these ‘cross-dressing’ shamans as in any way different, unlike the Chukchi for whom the *yirkalául* was something very specific. Later traces of the same phenomenon have been found in central Asia by Basilov (1978), with distant echoes among the Khanty (Balzer 1981).

Several overviews have appeared on this subject (*e.g.* Balzer 1996, Ripinsky-Naxon 1997), and the history of research into an engendered understanding of shamanism has been surveyed by Sandra Hollimon (2001: 124– 7). In addition to the ecstatic states of consciousness and the mastery of spirits focused upon by Eliade and Hultkrantz, Hollimon adds a new element to the definitions of circumpolar rituals by proposing that a key aspect of shamanism is “the experience of manipulating the supernatural power, especially that perceived to be housed in sexual energy” (*ibid*: 124).

In arriving at this conclusion, Hollimon’s primary point of comparison with the Siberian material is with the multiple genders associated with the indigenous North American religions. The standard work in this field is Sabine Lang’s 1998 study *Men as women, women as men*, which gathers all the main research. The study of the so-called ‘berdaches’ of the Native Americans is a vast topic which cannot be discussed at any length here, but both Lang and Hollimon review a very large spectrum of tribal examples of third and fourth gender shamanic figures to which the reader is referred (see also Roscoe 1987 and 1999; these concepts have important continuities to modern Native American sexual perceptions of ‘changing ones’ and ‘two-

spirit people', which go beyond the Western conventions of hetero- and homosexuality).

In the present context we can merely note the ubiquity of such liminal concepts in North American spiritual practices, with the same affinities to the Siberian ethnographic record as we find in the cosmology. We also find a range of transformation myths, and common mediating spirits of bears and ravens – again, as in Siberia and Scandinavia.

The concept of the shamanic gender reaches its probably most developed form among the Inuit, where it has also been amongst the most extensively studied. The leading scholar in this field is Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, who has explored the sexual aspects of Inuit spirituality in a number of crucial papers (*e.g.* 1986, 1988, 1989, 1992a–c, 2001; see also Taylor 1989 for a case study of sexual shamanism among the Labrador Inuit). As this work has shown, not only is sexuality *the* defining theme in Inuit ritual, but the role of the shaman is such that it constitutes a third gender in itself, alongside that of 'woman' and 'man'. This echoes the earlier conclusions of Czaplicka for Siberian religion, that "socially, the shaman does not belong to either the class of males or to that of females, but to a third class, that of shamans" (1914: 253). As with the Sámi, much of Inuit sexuality and spiritual power is connected with the unborn soul, and the complex rituals whereby names and identities are conferred in the specific temporal, geographical, seasonal and cosmological circumstances of birth. Building on many years of his own fieldwork and that of others, especially Knud Rasmussen, Saladin d'Anglure has focused on the notion of sexual relations between shamans and the spirit world, a subject to which we shall return in other contexts below.

Once again, there are obvious parallels between all these gender identities and the complex of sexual restrictions that surrounded Norse sorcery in the Viking Age. Along with the network of *ergi*-related practices and the men who took on such associations, we can also think of the various elements of the human soul, and their importance for the performance of *seiðr*. As a contemporary coda to this, it is worth also looking to pagan Anglo-Saxon England, and the evidence for similar gender constructions as postulated from graves (Knüsel & Ripley 2000, with an excellent discussion

and analysis of grave-goods that expands considerably on the data presented in Wilson 1992).

Thus far we have considered the sexual identity of shamans in the circumpolar area, but not the explicitly sexual aspects of the rituals themselves, of the kind that we have observed in connection with *seiðr*.

Eroticism and sexual performance

We can focus here on two forms – sexual components of the rituals, and sexual dimensions of shamanhood itself, expressed particularly in an erotic bond between shamans and their attendant spirits or other supernatural entities.

In many parts of the circumpolar region, as for the Norse, it is clear that almost every aspect of the shamanic ritual could be infused with more or less explicit sexuality. In some instances, these sexual overtones were fundamental to the nature of the performance. Pentikäinen has also stressed this point, with reference to what he calls the 'bodylore' of shamanism (1998: 53). He gives an example of such a sexual performance from a Selkup shamanka named Salda, in which he translates Anutshin's 1914 account of the chant sung in the Kaljagino district of Siberia, west of the Yenisei river. The shamaness is dancing ('…' in the text below indicates physical movement in between the spoken words) inside a firelit ring of onlookers, of mixed sex and age:

Men and women, have a look at what old Salda is doing … Boys and girls, have a look …
Am I a stranger to you? …
No, I'm your mother …
I've been living a long time …
I've been feeding many people: some are alive, some are dead …
Give something to the old Salda, she will be dancing well … She has always been dancing well …
Hey, men, give me some vodka …
Hey, women, throw some logs into the fire …

[The audience give her vodka and build up the fire. When the shamanka drinks the vodka, she screams and begins to jump wildly about, holding her breasts]

Burn brightly, fire …
The fire is hot, the smoke is bitter …
The coitus is sweet, but giving birth is bitter …

The front is hot from the fire, the back is cold from the wind …

The front is hot from the man, the back is cold\ from the ground …
The bird's got a lot of brain, the bear's got a lot of brain … Why am I not a bird, why am I not a bear? …
Every night the sun goes into the earth and comes out … My old man was a good worker, my old man was like the sun …
Don't you remember him, aren't you his children? …
My old man was hot on top to make Salda hot …
He was doing like this and I was doing like that …

[She mimes sexual actions]

Now the old man has gone, and I have become like a frozen ground …
Hey you, still having sex, why are you sitting? …
Come here, let's dance together …

[She repeats her appeals and some of the older women begin to dance. The younger members of the audience remain sitting, and discuss the behaviour of the old shamanka. Salda continues to more frenziedly mime sexual acts]

If my vulva had teeth, it would bite off the penis so that it could remain there forever.

[The dance and sexually suggestive activities continue until sunrise]

Pentikäinen 1998: 53–6 after Anutshin 1914; parenthesised explanations added

Among the Chukchi there was also a special category of sorcery with sexual objectives, usually performed by women against a female rival for a man's affections. Some of these involved projected transformations into animal form, for example in a charm to change the rival into carrion and the man into a bear, which would then eat the carrion and vomit it up, utterly destroying the victim. Men could also perform such rituals to attract women; the sources emphasise the role of saliva as the medium of the charm, which was effected by spitting it onto the target (Bogoraz 1904–9: 478, 507f).

Similar tales are told on the Canadian Northwest Coast, of shamans using their powers to obtain sexual favours. Sometimes this is in the form of more straightforward courtship, while at other times deception is involved, as for example in the Tsimshian story of the Trickster figure

Txamsem, who poses as a shaman whose penis will 'cure' a sick girl. Another common pattern is for a shaman to inflict illness in his chosen partner, and then demand her sexual compliance as the price of curing her (see the stories 'Txamsem seduces a young woman', 'Shaman's narrative, 'The narrative of Tsak' – Cove & MacDonald 1987: 31f, 113–7, 126–31).

These associations could also be reflected on the shaman's equipment. Some Siberian shamanic costumes included depictions of the wearer's sexual organs, as a sign of his or her power; sometimes the genitals of both sexes were shown, which is thought to have symbolised the change of gender (Nioradze 1925: 70). The paraphernalia of Northwest Coast shamanism also included a great many phallic and vulvic images (see Duff 1975: 48f, 84, 92f, 98, 114–22, 127).

An association is also seen between shamanic skill and sexual prowess, for example among the Teleut of southern Siberia. As the shaman climbs a pole representing the tree connecting the worlds, at a certain stage he begins to sing a sexually-explicit chant referring to his genital organs, intended to strengthen the potency of the community's men (Zelenin 1928: 91). In a similar context in the Tomsk region of Siberia, the shamanic horse sacrifices of the Kumandin included a performance by three masked men who 'galloped' around carrying large wooden phalli between their legs, with which they touched spectators; all the while erotic songs were sung (Zelenin 1928). A similar ritual was observed by N. P. Dyrenkova in 1927, among the Shoor people whose territory borders on that of the Teleut (Fig. 5.12).

The work of Saladin d'Anglure among the Inuit has been mentioned above, and the complex system of erotic dreams and sexual relations between shamans and their spirit assistants. Many Siberian shamans also had a sexual relationship with one or more of their helping spirits, and sometimes chose a 'wife' or 'husband' from among them (see Eliade 1989: 71–81). An example of this is recorded by Sternberg (1925: 475–8), in a detailed description given by a shaman of the Goldi people from the Amur region. By his account, the *ajami* (tutelary spirit) of his ancestors forced herself upon him sexually, thereby entering into a kind of marriage with him. Over the many years that this continued, the spirit granted him

gradually increasing powers of shamanship and the services of a number of *syvén* helping spirits. Sternberg also noted that the trance in which the shaman communicated with his *ayami* was itself highly erotic in its nature, with suggestive movements and sounds. Similar associations were noted by Shirokogorov when he participated in a prolonged election ceremony for a female shaman of the Manchu people (1935: 351–8), and he relates how the young woman experienced feelings of sexual arousal during her possession by the spirits who had come to decide whether she should proceed as a shaman. Despite this, Shirokogorov was sceptical to Sternberg's location of sexuality as one of the roots of Siberian shamanism, and instead argued that it was but one component among several (1935: 366–8).



Fig. 5.12 A masked man holds a wooden phallus during a shamanic ritual offered to the deity Kotshagan by the Shoor people of southern Siberia (after Pentikäinen 1998: 54; photographed in 1927 by N. P. Dyrenkova).

Moreover, sexual congress with a spirit did not always confer shamanic powers on a human being. Among the Yakut, human-spirit marriages occur both in folklore (Eliade 1989: 73), and in the documented ethnographic past, with descriptions of *abassy* spirits seducing similarly unwilling young people of either sex in their sleep (Sternberg 1925: 482). In most cases these encounters resulted in a general feeling of well-being, occasionally in life-long celibacy or a disruption to the individual's sexual life, and only in a minority of cases led to an acceptance of shamanhood.

Among the Teleut by contrast, human-spirit marriages were far more closely associated with the activities of the shaman (Sternberg 1925: 487). The Chukchi elevated this to a very public level, and Bogoraz describes how some shamans would arrange an annual or bi-annual ceremony during which they would appear naked, speak incantations over their genitals and address them to their helping spirits, thereby cementing the sexual bond between for a further period (1904–9: 449). These spirits were sometimes thought of as 'wives' and sometimes simply as sexual partners, though the distinction was somewhat blurred in Chukchi society which as we have seen afforded women a status scarcely better than slaves. At the same time as the Chukchi shaman could have one or more spirit wives, he could also take a human partner. Bogoraz was told how the faces of the spirit wives would watch the shaman from the walls and shadows of his dwelling, never giving his mortal wife peace. The Chukchi 'soft men' could take spirit husbands in the same way (*ibid*: 452ff).

We can isolate a number of common factors in the sexual elements of circumpolar shamanism:

- sexual relations between a shaman and his or her tutelary spirit(s) may be of various kinds, most often against the will of the shaman, and may include a form of marriage between the two

- such relations may result in the acquisition of additional powers, but are not fundamental to operation as a shaman; many shamans do not experience them
- such sexual relations may also occur between spirits and individuals who are not shamans
- sexual elements in shamanic rituals do not relate solely to the relationship between the shaman and his or her spirits, but also concern the broader fertility and sexual health of the community

Without venturing beyond the scope of the present work, we can merely note here that similar erotic components to those found in circumpolar ritual are also encountered in comparable shamanic belief systems in other parts of the world (*e.g.* Lewis 1989: 51, 57, 131; Vitebsky 1995: 56, 80).

From this sexual complex we can move to the other pole of sorcery as we have observed it in the Norse and Sámi worlds – that of magic used for violent or aggressive ends. This too has a wide range of circumpolar parallels.

Aggressive sorcery for offence and defence

Rituals for aggressive purposes were also a frequent feature of circumpolar practices (Fig. 5.13). Just as in Sámi society, the same categories of 'good' and 'evil' shamanic specialists were found in Siberia, though less detailed records have survived. Bogoraz noted two types among the Chukchi:

- *kurg-ene'nilit* 'mocking' shamans, with negative connotations
- *ten-čimnulm* 'well-minded' shamans, with positive connotations

They were also conceptualised in terms of colour symbolism, with the classic black and white shamans of the early Soviet ethnographies here rendered as respectively black and red. Their behaviour was also similar to that of the *noaidi*: for example, Bogoraz describes the eating of souls by Chukchi shamans in the same manner as we have seen among the *borå-noaidi* of the Sámi (1904–9: 430ff, 465).

Warfare among the Chukchi was conducted with an advanced array of equipment – complex bows, special lances and fighting knives, and suits of

armour made from overlapping iron plates and strips (Bogoraz 1904–9: 151– 68). It mostly took place at the level of low-scale combat or individual duels, and often involved ambushes or night attacks on sleeping camps (*ibid*: 639–42, 645). Chukchi war ‘sagas’ are also recorded, detailing larger-scale conflicts with the Cossacks, Eskimo, Tungus and Yukaghir peoples. In all of this, great emphasis was placed on individual combat and agility, through a complex network of associations between violence, strength and masculinity.

The role played by shamans in fighting was very prominent, and also a matter of honour. It was considered important to avenge attacks by enemy shamans as soon as possible (Bogoraz 1904–9: 483). The violent context of Chukchi shamanism can be seen in some of the alternative words for shamans, as they were described as being ‘resistant to death’ and ‘difficult to kill’ (*ibid*: 417).

One principle above all runs as a constant in Chukchi war sorcery, “the artificial creations, which are materialised, and then sent to destroy the enemy” (Bogoraz 1904–9: 481). This same idea of the projection of destruction is also found among the Inuit of Baffin Island (Boas 1901: 153, 363). Aggressive sorcery formed a category in its own right, called *ui’wel*. There were two types:

- *oiwa’chirg-ê’wgan* ‘spell incantations’
- *a’n^nêna-ê’wgan* ‘anger incantations’

Women specialised in these war charms, and in the now-familiar pattern there were also women whose sorcery worked as a protection against them. These took a physical form, as something summoned (or sometimes actually created) and then unleashed against the victim, who was said to be ‘doomed to anger’.



Fig. 5.13 Shamanism as aggression: a Mongolian shaman in trance, photographed in 1934. Note the locked facial muscles, and the eyes rolled back; the orignal was captioned by the photographer, "raving shaman" (after Forbáth & Geleta 1936).

The charms took the form of one or more spirit-animals, monsters, spirit-men or -women, or inanimate objects such as a stone or a tree. Sometimes just parts of an animal would be summoned: the upper half of a seal, the head of a fox. Some victims would go insane at the sight of such horrors; others were deceived into thinking that the spirit animals were real, and in trying to hunt them would be lured by the spirits out onto thin ice, or would otherwise die in an attempt to kill them. All of the animal spirits of this kind were associated with the ability to cause intense pain, and their purpose was primarily to torment their targets (Bogoraz 1904–9: 482f)

The summoned, or 'materialised' in the translation of the Chukchi term, creatures would attack the victim, and if successful, then either return to their sender or disintegrate having fulfilled their mission. It was very important that once summoned, the spirit be unleashed immediately for fear

of harming the summoner. A powerful shaman could ‘catch’ such creatures and restrain them; ashamed of their failure, the spirits would then insist on being sent against their sender, to revenge themselves on the shaman who had sent them into a trap.

The charms necessary to send such creatures were mostly performed by shamans, but could also be taught to others, called *hiule’t-re’mkin*, ‘knowing people’, another of these additional categories of ritual specialist. The charms could also be inherited at the death of their ‘owner’, or bought (Bogoraz 1904–9: 471f).

These spirits could also serve other purposes than simple attack. For example, a special class of them were known as *chi’chin*, ‘looking ones’, and employed as scouts to spy out terrain and enemy troops before a physical assault. There is an obvious parallel with the *gandir* and *fylgjur* that, as we have seen, in certain circumstances went ahead of an attack in Viking sorcery.

Animal transformation also played a prominent part in the imagery of Siberian aggressive sorcery. Spirit attacks might begin, for example, with the ‘Raven Incantation’, which a shaman would use to gain the power to hurt his enemies. The shaman’s knife would become the beak of the raven, ready to peck his foes (Bogoraz 1904–9: 508). Bogoraz collected several very detailed stories of spirit attacks on shamans, and it is interesting that among the Chukchi the dead themselves were considered to be enemy spirits (*ibid*: 417, 517ff).

The attack charms themselves were even more complex. Thus a victim’s spirit might be transformed into a seal-skin, which would then be consumed by spirit-shrimps summoned from the sea by the shaman. Alternatively, a victim might be symbolically wrung through a net into a pot, in the same manner as one strained half-digested moss from a reindeer stomach. The pot would be buried and covered with a bird’s wing, after which its contents would be transformed into a dog, which would wander lost from camp to camp. The same spell could create a dog of destruction, unleashed by the shaman on his enemies. A particularly terrible set of charms involved acts of cannibalism, in which the shaman in raven form pecked at a fresh corpse, representing his enemy. The nocturnal activities of this kind that shamans

performed in burial grounds contributed to the terrified awe in which they were held. Other spells, called *ei'ut,* were used to hinder an enemy or slow him down; they could also slow the dead, and thus bring them back to the world of the living (Bogoraz 1904–9: 480).

Variants of all these forms of aggressive sorcery were also found among the shamans of the Aleut, as was observed on the Billings expedition of the late eighteenth century (Saritchev 1802: 142).

As with the Chukchi raven-charm, it was also possible for a shaman to transform himself into a wolf to attack his enemies, having first smeared his mouth with fresh blood to symbolise the coming kill (Bogoraz 1904–9: 481). Similar imagery is found in Palaeo-Eskimo shamanism in the Canadian High Arctic, with excavated material from the period AD 500–1000 including human-wolf transformation figures. Especially striking are sets of wolf's teeth carved out of ivory, designed to be held under the upper lip to provide the wearer with lupine fangs (Sutherland 2001: 138f).

A crucial element in eastern Siberian war sorcery was first identified among the Koryak, in the form of objects that had been imbued with power through special rituals; the Koryak word for them meant simply 'things enchanted' (Jochelson 1908: 32). The charms were believed to be a form of interaction between the shaman and the vital principle contained within the object, essentially the 'soul' of the weapon or whatever else was to be made an instrument of shamanic aggression. Bogoraz (1904–9: 469f) noted the same phenomenon among the Chukchi, where one could go to a shaman to 'purchase' a charm to say over one's weapons. These charms could wear out, and after a time it was necessary to buy new ones to replace them. The act of fastening the charm to the object required great skill, and was fixed by the application of a shaman's saliva.

Clearly, the shamans were thought to wield potentially immense powers of destruction. If a Chukchi shaman became known for causing too much harm in a district, his neighbours or the community sometimes acted collectively to kill him, employing special means which have not been recorded (Gondatti 1898).

Outside the sphere of warfare, there were variants of the charms that could be applied to bring luck in hunting or fishing, in the sense of these

activities as an ‘attack’ on the animals concerned. Men performed the charms for hunting game, while women performed those for marine creatures. These latter rituals were performed at home, as the women charmed the seals, walrus and fish close to the shore where the men could catch them (Bogoraz 1904–9: 470). Some of the charms were very specific, for example for trapping wild reindeer as they crossed a river, whereas others were for general-purpose hunting. Of a related kind were charms for controlling the weather during the hunt, by subduing snowstorms or ‘tying up’ the wind (*ibid*: 496ff).

In the circumpolar shamanic cultures, it is not unusual to encounter actual defensive structures built in the ‘other world’ and intended to play a part in the spiritual combat that formed another dimension of ‘real’ fighting. For example, among the Evenki we find special breastworks of wooden stakes, *marylya*, set up around the boundaries of the spiritual space occupied by the clan, and guarded by shamanic beings (Anisimov 1963: 110; cf. Tolley 1995a: 66); the fences, which ‘exist’ only in the spirit world, are visible only to shamans. This concept of bounded space, including an aspect related to aggression and the defence of boundaries, is also found among the Khanty (Jordan 2001a and b) amongst other Siberian peoples.

We see similar patterns of violent sorcery on the Canadian Northwest Coast, where the ability to inflict harm must be seen as one of the most central aspects of shamanism. For example, a Tsimshian narrative about the great shaman Sqenu describes the moment when as a young boy he gains his first powers; wanting to see whether he really is becoming a shaman, the boy immediately tries to inflict various forms of damage – killing a seagull, crippling a man, and causing illness. It says much that his reputation as one of the most famous of shamans was built up by first making people sick, and then using his powers to cure them, in the process extorting vast sums of wealth as payment for the healing ritual. This is judged to be praiseworthy behaviour (Cove & MacDonald 1987: 113–7, ‘Shaman’s narrative’).

On the Canadian Northwest coast, a common form of spiritual attack was to use witchcraft to steal a person’s soul, and to then fill the empty body with evil spirits summoned for the purpose. To counter this, shamans

used special soul-catchers to retrieve the errant soul and restore it to the body. Often made from the hollowed leg-bones of bears, these objects were highly prized and were sometimes carved in the form of a double-headed animal (Kirby *et al.* 1995; Wardwell 1996: 196–204). The soul was thought to be very fragile, and there are tales of shamans who had retrieved them being carried very carefully because to walk by themselves would damage the soul (Swanton 1905: 311, in the 'Story of the shaman, G.a'ndox's father'). Along with other objects of power, the soul catchers were stored in special cedar boxes – a kind of shamanic 'tool box' – to conserve their energy and to prevent others from being harmed by it.

Combat between shamans, the classic duelling described in preceding chapters, was also common on the Northwest Coast. Using special weapons, usually 'different' in some way – perhaps broken, or daggers made of wood, or miniature carvings of blades – shamans would fight in spirit-form in their dreams (Kirby *et al.* 1995). In considering these special weapons we should perhaps remember the broken-pointed knife owned by the *volva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*.

Other tools used for shamanic duelling included bone head-scratchers, which could inflict projected injury on an opponent through their absorption of the potency contained in the hair. Shamans habitually kept the scratchers tucked into their hair, recharging their power to be available when required. Some of the greatest shamans, such as the Haida Kudé, grew their hair in waist-length dreadlocks as a symbol of their terrible power (Lillard 1981: 169; MacDonald 1996: 188f).

These conflicts could be epic in scope. The Tsimshian story of the Squirrel Shaman of Gitwansilk involves the deaths of two entire villages as two rival shamans fight in different guises, a battle that continues even beyond their deaths (Cove & MacDonald 1987: 132ff); the episode was commemorated in the totem pole of the victorious shaman's home village, now on display at the CMC in Gatineau. Duels could take place at famous landmarks, at man-made structures like bridges, and could continue underground or in the undersea worlds (for more stories of Tsimshian shamanic duels, see Cove & MacDonald 1987: 135–9).

Warfare was a major feature of life on the Northwest Coast – a significant difference by comparison with the Sámi but interesting in relation to the Norse. It was conducted over territorial disputes or conflicts over access to hunting and fishing resources, but also for specifically religious purposes. Sometimes quite large military expeditions were mounted to obtain ritual prerogatives, such as the right to wear certain masks in the important potlatch ceremonies. Important collections of war stories have been recorded among the Haida (Swanton 1905: 364–448), the Tsimshian (MacDonald & Cove 1987) and the other coastal peoples. Shamans played a prominent role in this kind of fighting, and preserved wooden weapons from the last two centuries or so are often decorated with painted spiritual designs. A Tlingit myth about a war between the Kā'gwantān and the Łuqā'xadî provides a good example of shamanic combat:

At that time there were two canoe loads of Island [Łuqā'xadî] people going along, and there was a shaman among them named Wolf-Weasel, who had eight tongues. The Kā'gwantān shaman tore his canoe apart by pretending to split the water of its wake. Before they got far out it began to split. The Kā'gwantān warriors had already landed at Xuq! creek where this shaman also went ashore, and they came out behind him. His spirits' apparel was in a box in the bow.

When the warriors rushed down upon them they soon destroyed his canoe men, but the shaman himself flew away by means of his spirits. Even now people say that a shaman can fly about. After he had flown about a certain town for some time the people told a menstruant woman to look at him. She did so, and he fell into a small lake. Then he swam under a rock, sticking up by it, leaving his buttocks protruding. To the present time this lake is red. It is his blood.

The sister and aunt of this shaman were enslaved, and the warriors also carried away his spirit box. Before they had gotten very far off, however, they stopped, untied the box, and began to handle the things in it. They took out all of the spirits [*i.e.* masks, whistles, etc], and asked his sister regarding one of them, "What is its name?". This was the chief spirit, and had a long switch of hair. Then the warrior in the bow put it on saying, "Let me be named Hanging-Down Spirit". Immediately he fell down as if he had been knocked over. He ceased to breathe. Another put it on. "Let me be named Hanging-Down Spirit", he said. All of those who put this on were destroyed. One, however, stood up, made a noise, and ran off. To this day his [*i.e.* the shaman's] spirit has not ceased killing.

From 'Story of the Kā'gwantān'; original text (not quoted here) and translation from Swanton 1909: 337ff

Many of these elements will be familiar from both Norse and Sámi contexts: sorcerers fighting each other as part of larger military parties; the decisive importance of sexual elements (the menstruating woman, and the shaman's exposure of his buttocks in defeat); the hazards of non-shamans handling shamanic equipment; the idea of confusion and mental control (the warriors' strange compulsion to wear the fatal object in the box); the power of the spirits, inducing death and madness.

The war shamans of the Tsimshian and Tlingit made extensive use of polished slate mirrors, which they employed as a meditation device in order to make their predictions about the course of a coming battle (Kirby *et al.* 1995). The idea of the reflected and distorted image seems to have been the key to this, as we see in the similar use made of pieces of natural quartz – shamans would stare into the fractured and opaque crystals 'to see things in another perspective' (*ibid*). They could also be used as magical projectiles, being sent out to kill or injure and then return to their owners (*e.g.* Cove & MacDonald 1987: 113f, 'Shaman's narrative').

The same war shamans also employed wooden images of their anthropomorphic helping spirits, from whom they could ask for assistance in battle. Among the Haida, a similar function (amongst others) is performed by flat humanoid images made of copper, which have remarkably close parallels in both form and function in the bronze charm-figures of the Ural region (cf. Fedorova 2001; Belocherkovskaja & Tuchmina n.d.). In relation to figures like these, which are common in the circumpolar region in various forms, we can yet again question the interpretation of three-dimensional human forms in Viking material culture: figures like the ithyphallic male from Rällinge, or the various representations of 'Óðinn', may represent gods, but there is no reason at all why they should not depict spirits instead.

In his studies of the Chukchi, Bogoraz noted how a large number of the rituals with a malignant or aggressive purpose required some sexual element in their performance (1904–9: 448f), providing the same link between these two themes that we have seen with *seiðr*, and which we shall expand upon in chapter 6.

Bogoraz describes how a shaman would strip naked and walk outdoors at night, revealing his genitals to the moon and praying that in return the moon would grant him the power to send a hostile spell against his enemies. The receipt of this power was accompanied by motions which, again, remind us of the Sámi 'eating of souls'. As Bogoraz puts it (1904–9: 449):

> He also makes peculiar movements with his mouth, as if catching something, and drawing it inward. This symbolises his desire to catch and eat up the victim.

In the same reference he gives further examples of naked shamans 'using' their genitals to project disease onto another person, and to ensnare reindeer. Chukchi folk-tales include a great many stories in which *kurg-ene'nilit*, 'mocking' shamans, use their powers to sexually humiliate men and to rape women, always with the same emphasis on the nudity of the shaman (*ibid*: 573). A strong theme of sexual violence was found in secular Chukchi society generally, linked to the low status of women, and this applied also to the spirit world as reflected in stories of supernatural beings committing rape (*ibid*: 588–90).

A similar practice is seen among the East Greenlandic peoples, in a context reminiscent of the Chukchi spirit attacks described above. Here, Inuit shamans would use their own sexual energy to empower evil spirits in the form of *tupilaks*, the grotesque supernatural creatures often depicted in carvings. Immediately prior to being unleashed to attack an enemy, the *tupilak* would fellate the shaman and in the resulting ejaculation absorb a portion of his power (Martin Appelt, pers. comm.).

An extension of these patterns on a larger scale were the 'spell wars' of the Chukchi, in which feuding families would duel with the aid of sorcery (Bogoraz records several examples, 1904–9: 482f). Occasionally these took the form of sexual magic, as in one case where a shaman constructed a dog of snow, transformed it into a handsome man, and sent it to the enemy camp. The man there made love to a beautiful woman, but in the act transformed back into a dog and ripped her to pieces, bringing her pelvis back to the shaman as a trophy. A similar idea of a dog-man committing acts of sexual destruction – though in the form of a spirit, not a material spell – is found among the Inuit of Baffin Island (Boas 1901: 166).

Such overtones to physical combat are seen in other areas with shamanic traditions. For example, in the Northwest Coast warfare mentioned above, the earliest-known war clubs sometimes have clearly phallic motifs – occasionally the entire club is effectively designed as an erect penis in stone (such as those from the Hagwilget cache on the Skeena river, and others from Hazelton and the surrounding region; Duff 1975: 114–27, 183ff). They include double-ended bi-phallic examples, others decorated with red pigment, and with the head of the penis (*i.e.* the killing surface of the club) transforming into a snarling animal. Some of the objects resemble clubs, and are clearly related to them, but include other elements such as a curving handle that would enable them to be put to different uses.

It is surely significant that the stone sculpture of the Northwest Coast deals overwhelmingly with the themes of sex and death, often intertwined in a perplexing ambiguity of meaning (see the sensitive essay on these objects in Duff 1975: 12–22; an interesting, if rather strained, queer re-reading of them has also been published in Marshall 2000). The clubs have attributes in common with several other ‘sexual’ objects from the Northwest Coast, such as a sculpture from Sechelt of a masturbating human with both male and female sexual organs, whose phallus is itself anthropomorphic. Duff (1975: 57f) has suggested that all these objects may have been owned by shamans, perhaps for the enacting of instructive ritual dramas, and draws support from a number of myths from the Northwest Coast and further inland. The notion of the shaman as a sexual mediator is central here (see Calkowski 1974), but in this instance linked to the additional domain of physical combat. The clubs clearly contain several layers of symbolic meaning. Spread over a date range that covers the last 2000 years, despite the difficulties of interpretation these weapons suggest that sexual elements clearly played some part in fighting between rival tribes even at this early period.

Having now reviewed the components of the shamanic world-view, in a Norse comparative context, we can now examine the archaeological interpretation of shamanism. Against a general background of work in this field we can focus on Scandinavia, looking briefly at the earlier prehistoric periods. From this we can move on through the Iron Age, to conclude with

a consideration of shamanic interpretation in the material culture of the Vikings.

Shamanism in Scandinavia

Considering Chuner Taksami's identification of shamanism as an *historical* phenomenon (1998: 14), how far is it reasonable to talk of shamanism in the prehistoric past? The answer, of course, can only be sought in studies of material culture, and thus archaeology. A deep examination of this topic is beyond the scope of this volume, but nonetheless forms a vital background to the interpretations presented. To offset this, as mentioned in the preface I have subsumed much of the comparative material that I assembled during the preparation of this thesis into a separate book, *The archaeology of shamanism* (Price 2001a); this collection of papers was put together in part as deliberate orientation for the arguments set out in this chapter. Since the first edition appeared, we are also fortunate to have a new pictorial synthesis of shamanic regalia in the Far North (Anawalt 2014) which can serve as a useful additional reference.

From the art of the hunters to the age of bronze

Over the years there have been several attempts to interpret the spiritual beliefs of Scandinavia in a shamanic context, from the earliest settlement at the retreat of the ice until the centuries preceding the Viking Age.

Building on an earlier work on the Bronze Age from 1997, still the most extensive archaeological study of shamanism in early Scandinavian prehistory is the doctoral thesis by Jimmy Strassburg (2000), *Shamanic shadows: one hundred generations of undead subversion in southern Scandinavia, 7000–4000 BC*. It is an ambitious and comprehensive volume, nearly 500 pages long with a detailed treatment of shamanic belief systems. For a time after publication it exerted significant influence upon shamanic studies in Scandinavian archaeology, and particularly on Iron Age research. Frequently cited in undergraduate essays, its theoretical positions were employed as support for a number of BA dissertations in Sweden. Charlotte Damm, who was the faculty opponent at Strassburg's thesis defence, commented that this is a controversial publication "to which indifference is impossible" (2002: 133), and she was right. The bulk of the text presents an extensive, erudite application of queer theory and engendered perspectives

to the issue of Mesolithic spirituality. Painting a detailed picture of a society under varying degrees of social stress and shamanic control, Strassburg's conclusions are startling and exciting in their originality. However, these ambitious approaches sit uneasily with the fundamental empirical requirements of such a study, and the inevitable limitations of an archaeological corpus drawn from very remote prehistory. To some extent, while striving earnestly for a dislocation of conventional approaches to ancient religion, this work is "couched in a characteristic Euroscandinavian mindset which is remarkably lacking in spirituality in the native sense" (Broadbent 2001: 36, referring to Strassburg's book). For the archaeology of shamanism, this typifies the difficulties of cultural situation that I discussed in chapter 1. The book gives us a vision of the Mesolithic in which we find "shamans reigning supreme" before giving way to "a dark age of raging water spirits" (Strassburg 2000: 95, 111) – a compelling narrative, but difficult to prove.

Conceptually, these ideas go back to the arguments for shamanism as representing a kind of 'primal religion', expressing humanity's first conceptualisations of the supernatural. The circumpolar context of the main shamanic ethnographies linked up well with the idea of an Ice Age spirituality, and were fuelled above all by the Palaeolithic art of mainland Europe (cf. Lommel 1967). The predominance of animal images in the painted caves was identified early on as an artefact of 'hunting magic', giving the pictures a magical function in supposed rituals to attract and control the movements of game herds. These perspectives were summarised in an influential work that revitalised the shamanic interpretation of parietal art, *Les chamanes de la préhistoire*, published by Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams in 1996. This book is an erudite extension to the European Palaeolithic of perspectives first developed for the rock art of southern Africa, the field in which the archaeological employment of shamanic interpretations has undoubtedly been most prominent in the last two decades.

This work has embraced many themes, from entoptic phenomena and altered states of consciousness, dreams, transformation and spirit animals, to the crucial concept of the rock surface as a membrane between the

worlds, through to recent work emphasising the past and present political context of the art. It has been summarised many times and will therefore not be dwelt upon further here, but the very significant prominence that these rock art interpretations have assumed in the archaeology of shamanism must be acknowledged (a complete introduction to this research is provided by Lewis-Williams 2001, which also includes a bibliography of the major literature within this field to that date – see in particular Lewis-Williams 1981, Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988, 1990; this research reached its zenith in a trilogy of books that found a reception far beyond the academy, Lewis-Williams 2002, 2010, Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2005; in my contribution to Lewis-Williams' *Festschrift* I also discussed at some length the impact of the 'southern African school' on the wider archaeology of shamanism beyond rock art studies, Price 2010b). In relation to this debate in rock art studies, an interesting synthetic contribution was made by James Pearson (2002), who offered a comprehensive presentation of the shamanic interpretation.

This view of Upper Palaeolithic cave art has also been extended to portable media, and the plastic decoration of sculpted anthropomorphic figurines from the same period. Dowson & Porr (2001), for example, have argued that these must be seen in a similar shamanic context to the paintings that have received more attention. Their detailed analysis of markings on the carvings, and their themes of human-animal transformation, suggest new interpretations of early Stone Age beliefs.

In Scandinavia, the shamanic debate in prehistory has focused upon the northern rock carvings from the later Stone Age, and in particular on their striking similarity with symbols on the Sámi drums (Marklund 2001). The majority of this work has focused upon the northern Norwegian localities, especially the carvings at several sites around the Alta fjord in Finnmark. Here are found a number of figures which appear to be clearly holding drums and drum-hammers, others in the 'X-ray style' characteristic of Siberian shamanic images, and scenes that have been seen as showing totem animals and hunting rituals, in addition to more diffuse carvings which have been interpreted as spirits and souls in transit (the bulk of this work has been undertaken by Knut Helskog – see his important publications

from 1987 and 1988 for synthetic overviews brought together in 2014, with research in 1990 on social context, 1995 on gender; similar comparisons have been made for Finnish rock art in Autio 1991).

In Sweden, the shamanic discussion of the Stone Age has been more controversial. Here the famous rock carvings at Nämforsen have been interpreted with the aid of Siberian spiritual analogies by Tilley in his book *Material culture and text* (1991: ch. 9), in which he makes a great many comparisons in explicit terms of shamanism and totemism. These conclusions were in themselves uncontroversial, but Tilley's book received an angry reception in Sweden due to its casual dismissal of the great scholar of Nämforsen, Gustaf Hallström, who devoted much of his life to the documentation of the carvings and on whose work Tilley was inevitably reliant. Criticising the lack of interpretative speculation in his monumental publication of the site, Tilley writes that, "Hallström's entire life's work ends without any conclusion. In this sense it is a complete failure. He clearly has little more grasp of the meaning and significance of the rock carvings at the end than he had at the beginning" (Tilley 1991: 10). However, as Baudou showed in his biography of Hallström (1997: 276–80), in fact the latter had developed very advanced interpretations of the carvings which he chose not to publish in conventional form, instead writing them up as short stories with an academic purpose. Composed in Swedish and hard to obtain – one was unpublished and the other appeared only in a stencilled *Festschrift* volume – Tilley had understandably overlooked these works to the detriment of his book, ironically given the rather post-processual medium of a free narrative that Hallström had chosen.

These fascinating stories demonstrate that Hallström too was convinced that the carvings were shamanic in purpose, in the familiar sense of 'hunting magic'. Furthermore, they also give an extra dimension to the sensibly cautious, modest and spiritually sensitive comment that he makes at the conclusion of his Nämforsen work:

> During the long lifetime that I have devoted to the problems of the rock-art of the North Scandinavian Stone Age I have imagined that I realized more and more clearly the forces that formed and transformed the spiritual habitus of the territory, even when the material garb it assumes would

seem to be poor. This poverty as well as that of the entire Scandinavian Peninsula has made us forget and makes us still forget that actually we know very little about the culture, spiritual and material, that was upheld by these scattered tribes. This is true particularly when we deal with the spiritual domain.

Hallström 1960: 370

This uncertainty has been expressed in other contexts connected to the shamanic interpretation of the northern rock art. For example, the 'Norwegian' carvings of this type have given rise to modern political debate over their ethnic origin, especially in view of their possible connections with the drum symbols (see Hætta 1995 for an impassioned Sámi perspective on this). Some later rock carvings, apparently from the Iron Age and of Sámi origin, have also been considered as depictions of transformation and shamanic themes (Bayliss-Smith & Mulk 1998, 1999).

These kinds of interpretations have also been carried over into later prehistory. As we have seen, in the 1960s and 70s a concern for the material culture of consciousness received new impetus with explorations of narcotics and hallucinogens in the archaeological record. From the 1980s onwards, shamanism has reappeared in archaeological interpretations with some regularity, mostly in the context of the post-processual concern for ancient symbolism and the meaning-content of material culture. Latterly, the emphasis on cognitive archaeology has increased this trend.

At the end of the twentieth century these perspectives were applied in particular to the European Neolithic and early Bronze Age, with Bradley's examinations of rock art (1989, 1997), once again Lewis-Williams & Dowson on the Neolithic symbol-world (1993), and Dronfield's work on the passage tombs (1994, 1995). In a similar vein we should also consider Sherratt's studies of narcotics and hallucinogens in prehistoric Europe (1987, 1991). In 2001 Miranda Aldhouse-Green published an important survey of Iron Age Celtic religion in Britain and Gaul, looking at themes of transformation and liminality, with the conclusion that a great many of the horned figures depicted in art of the period should be interpreted as shamans rather than gods.

Individually, the 'shamanically-relevant' publications of recent years run well into treble figures, making separate citation meaningless here, but

we can note that these ideas have been applied across the complete spectrum of time periods and regions – from the Stone Age to the beginning of the early medieval period, in all the culture areas of western Europe.

The same pattern may be found in Scandinavia, and as a single example of the extent to which these perspectives have broken through we can take the latest major synthesis of the Danish Bronze Age. Published as the second volume in Jørgen Jensen's *Danmarks oldtid*, this includes an entire section on 'shamanic' imagery (2002: 301–10), set out as an uncontroversial interpretation in what amounts to the authoritative archaeological history of Denmark. Here we find a familiar focus on rock carvings and metalwork, but also on less well-known material. The latter includes a finely-worked leather pouch from a grave at Hvidegården near København (*ibid*: 303), which contained a variety of bones and other organic objects interpreted as charms of some kind. The similarities with the pouch from grave 4 at Fyrkat are striking.

Seiðr before the Vikings?

This leads us to the later Iron Age itself. As we have seen in chapter 3, researchers in non-archaeological disciplines can be broadly divided into two camps in their perspectives on *seiðr* (the following is intended merely as a representative selection from the wider number of scholars discussed above):

- those supporting a shamanic interpretation, and the presence of ecstatic rituals
    - Almqvist, Andersson, Boyer, Brøgger, Buchholz, Dronke, DuBois, Ellis Davidson, Fritzner, Gardeła, Ginzburg, Grambo, Heide, Hermann Pálsson, Holtsmark, Hultkrantz, Höfler, Jochens, Lindquist, Meulengracht Sørensen, Ohlmarks, Olsen, Pipping, Steinsland, Ström, Strömbäck, Turville-Petre, de Vries
- those generally opposing the above
    - Bugge, Dillmann, Dumézil, Fleck, Näsström, Schjødt

It should be noted that great disagreements can also be found within each group, particularly in relation to the possible influence of Sámi beliefs (the

conflict between Strömbäck and Ohlmarks is the most obvious example). Similarly, some of those who disagree with the shamanic interpretation, such as Schjødt, nevertheless accept ‘shamanic overtones’ in the rituals. Other scholars, such as Clunies Ross and Tolley, have tended towards a mixture of both positions by expressing their ideas primarily in the context of medieval literary motifs rather than a Viking-Age reality (see also chapter 8 for their more recent positions). Still others, such as Eliade and Słupecki, define shamanism differently and thereby exclude *seiðr* (for example by focusing on ecstatic experience, following Ohlmarks).

Among archaeologists, two fields of research on shamanism can be discerned. The first considers a possible ancestry for *seiðr* and its related practices stretching back into the Iron Age before the time of the Vikings, while the second encompasses the archaeology of Viking sorcery itself.

In considering the Migration and Vendel periods in terms of shamanic practice, one class of artefact has predominated in material culture studies: the gold bracteates. Early links between Óðinn and the ideology of these enigmatic objects were made by Sune Ambrosiani (1907) in his study of the origins of the god’s cult in the North. He argued that the idea of Óðinn was a reflection of the later imperial cults of the Romans, built up around the deified emperors and transmitted to the Germanic tribes in the form of the medallions that were the prototypes for the bracteates (a notion later taken up by Kaliff & Sundqvist in 2004; see also Price & Mortimer 2014 and Widerström & Price 2017 for a supporting argument based on a new find of a Roman cavalry mask at Hellvi on Gotland, which seems to have been repurposed as an image of Óðinn).

Other authors generally followed this line in the sense of the clear relationship between Roman models and the Scandinavian metalwork, but their detailed religious dimensions were left largely unexplored until after the Second World War. Scholars such as Alenstam-Petersson (1949) and Kühn (1959) began to realise that the imagery on other metalwork, such as brooches, was more than merely decorative and in fact formed an iconographic scheme that seemed to have mythological allusions. This world of symbolic and figurative representation was taken up more profoundly by Wilhelm Holmqvist in his important paper on ‘The dancing

gods' from 1960. Here he made a tentative attempt to trace the links between the imagery of bracteates, gold foils, brooches, collars and helmets of the Migration to Viking periods, and to reassemble their iconographic content into a coherent whole representing an Iron Age view of reality.

At this time the first shamanic interpretations of the bracteates were put forward by Karl Hauck, in a programme of work that continued to his death in 2007 (*e.g.* 1972, 1976, 1983, 1985–89 amongst a great many others). Most of his readings of the bracteates focus on suggested icons of Óðinn – in scenes of transformation, apparent soul-journeying, and in spiritual communication with animals such as horses, birds and boars. These latter images are claimed by Hauck to represent scenes of healing, as for example when Óðinn cures Baldr's horse in the Second Merseburg Charm, examined above in chapter 3. All these depictions have been analysed alongside other images argued to represent scenes from Norse mythology, such as Tyr with his hand in Fenrir's mouth.

Hauck's model of the bracteates as firm evidence for an early shamanic element in the religion of the North has been the starting point for most subsequent archaeological work on this aspect of the Iron Age. The same objects are found again and again in the literature, often employed as a foundation for interpretations that go far beyond what Hauck himself actually suggests. There is no doubt that many elements of Hauck's ideas about the iconography of the bracteates are well-argued. However, problems begin to arise with the fact that only a relatively small proportion of the total bracteate corpus can be interpreted this way, and also that these hypotheses are far from proven. Those who employ Hauck's work in a secondary sense often focus upon this group with disproportionate emphasis. Secondly, Hauck's own interpretations tend towards a monolithic, static reading, rather than allowing space for the objects to have been used in a pluralistic arena in which meaning was negotiated. The mythological readings of the bracteates and foils have been usefully deconstructed by Märit Gaimster (1998: 212–23, with a comprehensive guide to Hauck's work), and another effective critique of this same material was made along similar lines by Kathryn Starkey in 1999.

The debate on the meaning content of late Iron Age material culture also concerns the semiotics of more conventional dress in the later Iron Age. Here too we find an important distinction between the cultures of pre-Christian Scandinavia and those of their European neighbours, once more centring on 'religion' as an expression of the way in which the world, even reality itself perhaps, was perceived and understood. We have seen this fluidity of boundaries – whether social, sexual, political or spiritual – many times in the preceding chapters. It should therefore come as no surprise that this is also relevant to the meaning content of 'art' in the Iron Age North, for this flexibility may well have granted Scandinavia's artists a freedom that those in Europe had not yet discovered.

In 1980 Holmqvist returned to the spiritual aspects of the Scandinavian metalwork with a popular-science work on the gold collars, in which he argued that these neck-rings may have had similar symbolic and shamanic overtones to the bracteate images. Looking at other objects, Siv Kristoffersen (1995) used structuralist theory to argue that Germanic animal art of the Migration period reflected ideas of transformation, and in particular depictions of the *fylgjur*. Following her arguments, the jewellery of the period formed an element in a regulatory social system, and a point of reference for the wearer's identity in its most fundamental form. Once again, this was explicitly related to *seiðr* and shamanism (*ibid*: 13). In 1997 Marta Lindeberg returned to the bracteates and the question of sorcerous Óðinn imagery, arguing that this material has been under-used in discussion of female gender roles in the later Iron Age.

Another scholar who has closely followed Hauck's ideas is Lotte Hedeager, who is also so far the only archaeologist to have proposed a fully-developed model for shamanic thought in Iron Age Scandinavia, albeit mostly limited to a discussion of the Migration Period (Hedeager 1997a & b). Several themes run through this work, building in part on Hedeager's earlier papers (*e.g.* 1993, 1996) and centring on the development of a distinctive quasi-religious warrior ideology in northern Europe, and its links with the chiefly patronage of cult. In her 1997 book, Hedeager maps out a complex argument for a military elite establishing its power-base in the form of worship connected to gods that represented them, especially Óðinn.

The latter embodied the idea of access to the other world, engineered through his role as the supreme shaman. This is turn is seen as a metaphor for the systems of control whereby the upper strata of Iron Age warrior rulers ordered their own societies. The various medieval stories of Óðinn's origins in Asia are taken to reflect deep folk memory from the age of continental migrations, the period that gave rise – in Hedeager's argument – to the ideology of divinely legitimated power. This mythology of rulership is extended to all the Germanic peoples, with a putative foundation in Scandinavia. This same cultural background provides the explanatory context for the shamanic elements in the cult of the war-god. In terms of material culture, Hedeager focuses mainly on the symbolism of animal ornament, the role of the 'illustrated' helmet with its figurative plaques, and the power of runes.

The book was not well-received by philologists and historians of religion, who generally applauded Hedeager's effort while pointing to alleged problems with her handling of the written sources (*e.g.* Clunies Ross 1998b, Schjødt 1999). Archaeologists were more positive, with Herschend (1998b) welcoming a synthesis that matched his own models for early Iron Age kingship, though Näsman's extensive reading of the book (1999) focuses more on source-critical problems, especially in connection with Hedeager's pan-European frame of reference for her suggested Germanic origin myths. In its details few aspects of the book are entirely new, but the work is unique in that it is the only attempt to create a holistic and dynamic model of Iron Age society in which *seiðr* (at an early date) and a possible Nordic shamanism are given a central role. In another major work from 2011, Hedeager developed this into a larger model for eastern influences on Scandinavian culture, especially from the Huns, and not least in the context of an 'early' Óðinn.

One aspect of this material has been explored in greater depth by Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, in her discussion of engendered performance in the late Iron Age (1999). Working once more from Hauck, she builds on Holmqvist's suggestions and takes up the south Scandinavian gold foils, along with the collars and bracteates again, to deconstruct a world of masked shamanic figures as queer guardians of access to sacred knowledge.

Focusing on the foils from Bornholm, she interprets the beaded borders of the objects as representing doors, “perhaps signifying the start of the journey to other worlds, a liminal and transcending phase”; figures with their hands raised by their mouths are seen to be shouting, “maybe to guide the shaman back from spiritual travels”; drinking horns in the figures’ hands are filled “perhaps with sacred drugs”; and the humanoids with collars appear to show “a possible shaman in trance”. In her discussion she takes up transformation in connection with *seiðr*, and describes the foils as collectively depicting “shaman shape changers in liminal action” (all quotations from Back Danielson 1999: 13f).

Back Danielson’s interpretation of Iron Age shamanic functionaries is interesting, with an effective problematisation of concepts such as masking (cf. her book that followed in 2007; see chapter 8 below). As with her work on the Hemdrup staff – discussed in chapter 3 – most of these ideas are entirely plausible as shamanic interpretations of the *seiðr* complex, fascinatingly early in this case. In one sense I would not be at all surprised if Back Danielson’s model is correct, but ultimately, the gold foils depict queer shamans wearing shamanic neck rings and shamanic masks, imbibing sacred drugs and journeying through shamanic doors, because Back Danielson has decided that they do. As an illustration of an alternative, more materially grounded route through comparable terrain, we can take Anders Andrén’s work on ‘keyhole-shaped’ Gotlandic picture-stones, which he interprets as symbolic doors on the basis of exact comparison with similarly formed portals on Norwegian stave churches (1989, 1993a; cf. Arrhenius 1970). My own interpretations of the iron staffs from female burials is likewise based upon direct links between the objects as found and literary descriptions of Viking-Age sorceresses’ tools.

Important work on the meaningful art of the pre-Viking Iron Age has been published by Bente Magnus (2001, building on another paper from 1997). Looking at early relief brooches, especially those in Style I, beyond the motifs themselves she also examines a variety of other, less familiar aspects of the jewellery, including its placement on the body, its degree of visibility and proximity to the flesh of the wearer. In a case study of the brooch from Ekeby in Uppland, she sees the dramatic relief design of

animals and humans as a symbol of destruction and the Ragnarok, but perhaps worn as an emblem of shamanic regeneration and in reference to Óðinn (Magnus 2001: 286–92). She argues furthermore that such brooches were perhaps among the dress accessories of the Scandinavian sorceresses (*ibid*: 292).

Taking all this work in summary, the conclusion is clear: while the vocabulary of *seiðr* is hard to push further back in time (and hard enough to apply in the Viking Age), there seems little doubt that the operative social mechanisms of sorcery that it encoded had roots far deeper into the Iron Age. This was not an innovation of the Viking period.

Landscapes of the mind

Most of the above examples have concerned a possible Nordic shamanism in the centuries preceding the Viking Age. As we have seen, for this latter period proper there have been abundant publications by historians of religion, philologists and anthropologists. Interestingly, the same acknowledgement of Nordic shamanism is often found among historians of religions working *beyond* the bounds of early Scandinavian culture, used as a point of reference. As an example we can take Lundmark's work on female shamans among the Sámi, with its rather florid comparison to "the *volva* on Nordic soil" whose existence is accepted without question and indeed presented as supporting evidence for her Sámi equivalent (Lundmark 1987: 168; see also Lundmark 1977: 62 for a more developed appraisal).

Despite this long interest, archaeologists have come relatively late to the discussion. Birgit Arrhenius's 1961 paper on miniature amulets, mentioned above, briefly took up the associations of staffs and *seiðr*, but this stood alone for several years. It was not until Bente Magnus' ground-breaking publications (1988, 1992) on possible runestone allusions to shamanic functionaries that the idea of this kind of belief system in Viking-Age religion began to take root in archaeological circles. In chapter 3 we have already seen a number of archaeologists who have followed Magnus' lead to work with shamanic imagery in the context of Nordic sorcery, *seiðr* and the *volur* (for example Gundula Adolfsson, Tove Hjørungdal, Anne Stine Ingstad, Inga Lundström, Brit Solli, and Leszek Gardeła).

These works have largely focused on gender, but other scholars have looked at totally different aspects of the shamanic concept, such as the notion of special mental qualities associated with kingship. Frands Herschend (1997a: 55–9) has argued that the Iron Age king should possess a kind of divinely-inspired organisation of the mind, manifesting itself in supernatural abilities such as prediction. One example of this is the ability to see a fight coming from another world into this one, thus giving sufficient time to ready one's people accordingly. Herschend cites the so-called Finnsburg Fragment in this context, when the Danish hero Hnæf perceives the approach of Finn's men before his own retainers are aware of it. Herschend has also extended this idea of the shamanic overtones of kingship into the boat grave cemeteries, interpreting the vessels themselves as representations of the hall (1997a: 49–59), a 'dwelling' for the dead chieftain and a metaphor for a journey of the soul. The selection and disposition of the grave-goods are seen as status-loaded allusions to different gods – especially Óðinn as the ancestral founder of the royal line – and the grave itself as a place of communication between the realms of humans and divinities, mortal rulership and its supernatural power-base.

Some of this archaeological work takes a more enthusiastic line on shamanism than others. An example of this is Arnefrid Opedal's book *De glemte skipsgravene* from 1998, about the high-status burials in and around Avaldsnes. Here she mentions the description from *Grímnismál* in which Óðinn is made to sit between two fires for several nights, which as we have seen in chapter 3 has been interpreted by some as a shamanic initiation rite. Opedal then goes on to speculate that perhaps the remains of charcoal or fires at burial sites can be seen as reflections of such shamanic rituals (1998: 107). Even ignoring the fact that much has been written against the shamanic interpretation of *Grímnismál*, we still cannot interpret any likely fireplace as 'shamanic'. This is unfortunate, in that Opedal makes several other interesting observations about the wider sorcerous overtones of the Storhaug burial, which she places effectively in the context of Óðinnic ritual, transformation and mythology (*ibid*: 76–108).

In 2000 an archaeological examination of Óðinnic sacrifice on the 'sacred gallows' was published by Pluskowski, reviewing the familiar

literary and iconographic sources but interestingly looking for material correlates at Anglo-Saxon sites, especially Sutton Hoo. The results are inconclusive, but this remains a rare attempt to archaeologically trace beliefs in Óðinn beyond the immediate Scandinavian sphere.

The publications mentioned above are generally of high quality, but it has to be said that some of those working in this field, especially in the Viking Age itself, have not been so thorough. It would be invidious to mention names, but one can almost suggest that as what we might call the 'shamanic lobby' in Viking archaeology goes from strength to strength, the quality of the work produced seems to decline in equal measure. There would seem to be three major problems which partly develop from each other:

- firstly, there are very few of the scholars now working in this field who have tried to familiarise themselves in detail with the corpus of research on circumpolar shamanism in general, and Sámi religion in particular
- secondly, the interpretations of *seiðr* that have been put forward almost always stop at the same point, namely the relatively unsophisticated (and further undefined) suggestion that this and other forms of Óðinnic magic may have been 'shamanistic' in nature
- thirdly, this work has not always been combined with a comprehensive understanding of the Old Norse written sources, which in philological terms involve extremely complex elements; expert guidance is needed here, as such skills are not always easy for an archaeologist to acquire

As with the preoccupations of early *seiðr* research outside the archaeological sphere, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the early material culture studies of this material have also focused on a handful of key topics:

- sorcery and its analogues
- the gender constructions and sexual overtones with which sorcery was encoded
- the supernatural beings (as opposed to divinities) through whose agency sorcery was empowered

- the importance of the soul and how it was conceived in the context of sorcery and its practice
- the perception of animals in relation to the concept of the soul

Beyond archaeology, several specialists in other disciplines have drawn shamanic parallels for Nordic material culture. In general these have been very convincing, such as the circumpolar use of platforms in shamanic ritual, echoing the practices of *seiðr*. Among the Samoyedic peoples, the nearest eastern neighbours to the Sámi, the use of four-legged platforms was discussed by Castrén (1855: 165), Lehtisalo (1924: 157) and Nioradze (1925: 91).

Philologists too have taken this comparative route. Ursula Dronke, who in her editions of the *Poetic Edda* has consistently followed Clive Tolley's positive line on Viking-Age shamanism, extends this to the nature of the territory through which the 'shaman' travelled. In her studies of *Voluspá*, with its descriptions of the various halls of the gods, she has identified a potentially important aspect of this:

> Are the many halls a characteristic of a popular shamanic genre in Norse? When Óðinn begins his vision in *Grím*[*nismál*], it is the *salir* and *salkynni* of the gods that he sees. This focus upon halls most probably reflects the central role of the grander farms in thinly populated countryside, as in Norway, Iceland, Ireland, where every traveller hopes for shelter. A shaman would no doubt build upon familiar images to set in relief the significant differences of his vision world.
>
> Dronke 1997: 141

The emptiness of the Nordic countryside is debatable, but the idea of the divine geography of Ásgarðr mirroring a shamanic visionscape is interesting. It is worth remembering here that in many ways the entire physical landscape was populated with supernatural beings, extending this perception of another world even into invisible dimensions of our own. We see this in the vision experienced by Þorhallr spámaðr in *Þiðranda þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar*, as Christianity begins to make itself felt in the land and the secret population flees before it: *at margr hóll opnaz ok hvert kvikvendi býr sinn bagga bæði smá ok gera fardaga*, 'many a hill is opening and every living thing is preparing its luggage and both little and large are

moving house'. This comes very close to the 'ensouled world' of the circumpolar cultures that we have seen above.

Birgitta Johansen has also taken up this idea in her thesis from 1997, in which she argues for a complex, almost structuralistic network of associations in the Nordic landscape. She sees mountains and burial mounds as representative of the ancestral world, bounded by protective 'walls' (ramparts and field boundaries) which towards the end of the Viking Age were given a symbolic echo in the ribbon-like dragons within which runestone inscriptions were cut.

These links are inevitably conjectural, but a more convincing sequence of this kind has been put forward by Anders Andrén (1989, 1993a) in the exciting interpretation of death rituals on Gotland that has been mentioned above. Looking at picture-stones, these monuments are seen as commemorating the dead and simultaneously emphasising their family's right to the land thus marked, like the mainland runestones. However, through their mythological iconography they also tie individual ancestral lines to particular sacred narratives (the range of scenes on the stones has been analysed many times, with elements of the Sigurðr tales, the Óðinn cycle and so on). With each new stone, with its new set of images in new combinations, the family epic is augmented and maintained, binding the dead and the living in an eternal world of stories that is also spatially located. On analogies with the keyhole-shaped doors of Norwegian stave churches, Andrén argues that the Gotlandic stones may also have been 'doors', points of access to the mythological realm of the ancestors that surrounds and protects each family and its land. This may be a Gotlandic expression of a broader phenomenon, as the combinations of images on the stones could elsewhere be represented by patterns in grave-goods, each object placed in the grave after its use in a ritual drama enacted in conjunction with the funeral.

Andrén's idea is important because it marks the first time that archaeological evidence was used to extrapolate an integrated system of 'real' and 'non-real' reality from the Norse cultural landscape. When the argument is expanded to include the wider discussion on mortuary drama, the idea of a 'theatre of death' accompanying burial rituals, then the

implications become clear. It should be emphasised that this is not necessarily an interaction between humans and the world of the gods, but with a more generalised and perhaps more vaguely conceived world of the spirits (see also Jakobsson 1997). Johansen has claimed that the use of pagan ideas in the Christian medium of runestones broke the connection between traditional beliefs and their expression in this way, but I feel that the opposite is true. Through adopting a syncretic approach to the Christian mission, the church ensured that these 'low-level' aspects of the old beliefs in fact continued. We will return to this below, but first we can consider some more specific shamanic elements in the archaeology.

The eight-legged horse

In chapter 3 we looked briefly at Sleipnir, Óðinn's eight-legged horse on which he rides between the worlds. This is in fact one of the clearest indicators that the belief system of the Viking-Age Norse can be considered in the same context as the 'shamanic' societies reviewed above.

Looking at the archaeological sources, such animals appear in several media, but without doubt the most prominent is its occurrence as the main motif on a few examples of the picture stones set up continually since the early Iron Age as carved memorials to the dead on Gotland. The Viking-Age stones usually stand between two and three metres high, and most often bear an image of a rigged sailing ship on the lower half of the surface. The upper half is either divided into several lateral panels or contains a complex jumble of images, and it is among the latter that in four, perhaps five, instances we find the eight-legged horse. The stones in question come from Alskog Tjängvide I, Ardre I and VIII, and Lärbro Tängelgårda I and II (Lindqvist 1941: 95f, 99ff, figs 86, 89, 137–40, 166; 1942: 15–25, 92–6; Fig. 5.14).

An interpretation of these images as depicting Sleipnir is natural and fits well with the stones' function as memorials, as the scene could then represent either Óðinn riding to Valholl, or perhaps the dead man himself for whom Óðinn has sent his horse. We would then see the deceased being welcomed to his afterlife reward. However, this identification is brought into serious question by other examples of similar creatures depicted on a number of remarkable woven hangings found in 1910 at the church of

Överhogdal, in the Swedish province of Härjedalen (Horneij 1991; Frantzén & Nockert 1992; Figs 5.15–5.17). The weaves have been radiocarbon-dated to the period 800–1100, the Viking Age. They are hard to interpret, but depict a blend of abstract symbols, buildings, numerous human figures and different kinds of creatures, all laid out in a single, composite image which is very hard to understand as a sequential narrative, though there have been several attempts which have seen in the weaves stories of everything from the Ragnarok to early Christian missions to convert the Sámi (these are reviewed in Horneij 1991: ch. 4).



Fig. 5.14 Two Gotlandic picture-stones with images of the eight-legged horse. At left, stone I from Alskog Tjängvide; at right, stone VIII from Ardre (after Lindqvist 1942: 17, 25; drawings by Olof Sörling).



Fig. 5.15 Weave Ia from Överhogdal (Creative Commons).



Fig. 5.16 Weave Ib from Överhogdal (Creative Commons).



Fig. 5.17 Weave II from Överhogdal (Creative Commons).



Fig. 5.18 An eight-legged horse from weave II from Överhogdal (Creative Commons).



Fig. 5.19 A six-legged ?reindeer from weave Ib from Överhogdal (Creative Commons).

In this context it is therefore striking to see that on weaves 1a & b (two portions of the same original hanging) there are no less than four eight-legged horses, depicted alongside three more with six legs and one with

seven (Fig. 5.18). In addition the weave shows one six-legged elk and six six-legged reindeer; a further six-legged creature may be either a horse or an elk, the tell-tale head being lost where the weave has frayed. In most cases the horses are unmounted, though in a single instance a rider is shown. One of the eight-legged horses and one of the reindeer are also shown with what appears to be a prominent phallus. In addition to these, weave II contains a single image of the eight-legged horse, this time bearing two riders.

It would seem difficult to interpret *all* the Överhogdal horses as representations of Sleipnir, and in fact the notion of more than one such creature accords well with ethnographic records of more recent shamanic communities. These animals are recorded as the mounts of shamans all across Siberia, for example among the Buryat, and even as far afield as Japan and India, leading some historians of religion to call this the shamanic horse *par excellence* (Elwin 1947: 150; Eliade 1989: 380; Diachenko 1994; Price 2000b & c, 2004a). In some parts of Siberia, the beats of the drum during a shamanic performance are actually intended to represent the pounding of this horse's hooves, increasing in tempo when the creature and its rider gain speed as they journey to other worlds (Glosecki 1989: 10).

Óðinn's horse reproduces many of the features found in connection with them elsewhere: the god rides him to other planes of existence, and Sleipnir's origins also resemble the Buryat myth for the eight-legged horse's birth. It may have been that the supernatural steeds of Viking trance-sorcerers were eight-legged horses, and that Óðinn's one of these was called Sleipnir: this is a crucial difference, I feel, because it takes these creatures and these images out of the realm of gods and into the realm of human beings.

The other creatures on the Överhogdal wall-hangings also have Siberian parallels, for example among the Khanty (Pentikäinen 1996b: 172ff; 1998: 68–70) for whom they are – once again – a means to communicate between the worlds. The creatures along the lower border would seem to be reindeer, or perhaps elk, on the basis of their antlers and general body form, quite different from any of the other animals depicted; they are also shown in a

group, a herd perhaps, and we know that reindeer husbandry was part of the Sámi economy at this time (Fig. 5.19). Thus the weaves should also be seen in a cross-cultural context, the same sphere of Norse-Sámi interaction as we saw at Vivallen in chapter 4, and in fact the two sites are only 120 km apart.

In most discussions of the Överhogdal weaves, which are by any estimation one of the most remarkable visual documents to have survived from the Viking period, it is surprising that the six-legged deer are always treated either as ordinary animals or else simply 'strange creatures', impossible to explain. I would suggest that here we may be seeing a Sámi counterpart to the Nordic eight-legged horses, depicted side-by-side with them on a wall-hanging made, within the Nordic culture, in just such an area of interaction. It may be that all these multi-legged animals represent different components in the shamanic complexes of the Viking-Age Scandinavians and Sámi. The variety of animals depicted fits well with the more nuanced view of these belief systems advocated above.

Tricksters and trickery

In assessing the case for a 'shamanic' interpretation of Old Norse religion, there is one mythological type-figure that deserves special attention: the so-called Trickster, as arguably personified in the ambiguous character of Loki.

Loki has long been seen as a problem by historians of religion, in that he is not a god *of* anything – he has no obvious function, even in the relatively low-key sense that characterises the other deities in the Norse pantheon. There is no evidence for a cult associated with him, and there are no theophoric place-names that include his name. In the mythology he serves many roles, some of them mutually contradictory, and there have been attempts to broaden each of these into an interpretation that goes further than the tales really warrant. Thus Loki has been seen as the pagan counterpart to the Christian Lucifer, in the sense of a dark mirror to the 'angelic' nature of gods like Baldr; a negative reflection of Óðinn; a fool-like figure serving the gods as a kind of jester, by comparison with other traditions such as the Greek Hermes; and, most often, as a spirit of fire (Loki is one of the most intensely-studied figures in Norse mythology, with major works on him by Bugge, Dumézil, Holtsmark, Olrik, Schjødt, Ström,

Turville-Petre and many others; the literature is summarised by Simek 1993: 193–7; see also Bonnetain 2006).

De Vries (1957: §501–8) was one of the first to attempt to combine Loki's contradictions, into something resembling the figure that historians of religions usually call the Trickster. The classic description of such beings is found in the work that initiated the serious study of the archetype, Radin's *The Trickster* (1956):

> In what must be regarded as its earliest and most archaic form, as found among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.
>
> Radin 1956: ix

As Radin notes, these beings are most typically embodied by the animal culture-heroes in North America, but it is worth emphasising that all these traditions are also shamanic. The Native American Tricksters include Raven, Mink and Blue Jay among the Northwest Coast peoples; Coyote in California, the Southwest and parts of the plains; Rabbit in the Southeast; and Spider on the high plains (an impressive collection of myths about these figures can be found in Erdoes & Ortiz 1998; some of the Raven stories have already been referred to above).

Trickster studies have advanced considerably since Radin's ground-breaking work (*e.g.* Lundquist 1991 and the papers in Hynes & Doty 1993), with a great expansion in the different contexts in which these figures have been recognised. Found in every continent, the Trickster myths have been treated in a similar fashion to the broadest, global definitions of shamanism discussed above, with a focus more on cultural context than psychological origins. The Trickster has also been brought within the discourse of socially-sanctioned deviance, comparable with the notion of queer shamans discussed in chapter 3 and above in relation to gender constructions.

In this light, the stories attached in particular to the Native American Trickster beings show remarkable similarities with the kind of

transformative, shape-changing mischief perpetrated by Loki in the Norse myth cycles – generally harmful or destructive, often obscene and occasionally evil, but always essential for the continuance of life. In particular, a convincing attempt has been made to actually identify Loki with the spider figure (see Rooth 1961b: 189–210), and thus to argue that he fits smoothly with the Trickster cycles of the sub-arctic belt. This is an important deduction, which can be compared with the other affinities that we have seen between the Norse belief systems and those of ancient North America.

The significant difference is that Loki also forms part of a semi-formalised pantheon of gods, organised in divine families. He is also, of course, among the leaders of the forces of destruction at the Ragnarok. According to Snorri's *Edda*, Loki is the progenitor of a number of the creatures that will play a significant role at the end of all things, including Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent and indeed Hel herself. However, he is also the 'mother' of Sleipnir, Óðinn's horse, which he bears while transformed into a mare (the *ergi* of this act, as brought up in *Lokasenna*, has been explored above). Even his actions at the Ragnarok are not entirely incompatible with this, as a supreme representative for the powers of chaos.

The Trickster has long been seen in the context of shamanism, even in relation to remote prehistoric periods (*e.g.* Campbell 1959: 274f). However, while some scholars have understood this as a relationship of equals existing side-by-side in symbiosis, others have seen it in terms of an opposition. Ricketts, for example, sees the shaman as representative of humanity's awe and respect for the spirit world, while the Trickster is a contrasting symbol of self-sufficiency (1993: 87). In the latter view, the supernatural powers are "not to be worshipped, but ignored, to be overcome, or in the last analysis mocked" (*ibid*).

Mostly importantly in a Viking context, this work has drawn attention to the types of ritual behaviour that surround shamanism, but which are located in the parallel world of the Trickster. They key concepts here are those of imitation and deception, because these rituals are built up around a *simulation* of shamanism, often with a repertoire of practices that go to great lengths in the effort to reproduce such performances (Ricketts 1993:

92–9). Most significantly of all, these shamanic simulations are most often located within warrior fraternities, often united by traditions of totemic masking and animal transformation. These practices are seen on the Canadian Northwest Coast (Boas 1895), among the central Algonquians (Hoffman 1885–86), and the Iroquois False-Face societies (Speck 1949) – all constructed as parodies of the true shamanic rituals performed by other members of the same communities.

Among the Viking-Age Scandinavians, the ambiguities of Loki have been noted, but Óðinn too has aspects of this trickery, and especially the strange sexual contradictions that lie at the core of his mastery of *seiðr*. It may be that in the Óðinnic activities of the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* we see something similar to this parallel world of shamanic emulation, explored further in the next chapter.

Seiðr and circumpolar shamanism

The question has been posed time and again by each successive generation of scholars: in the *seiðr* complex and its related rituals, did the Viking-Age Scandinavians practice something that might be termed shamanism? As we have seen, the answers given previously have veered between two poles of conviction and scepticism, balanced in between by an acceptance of 'shamanistic tendencies', the nature of which has most often been left tantalisingly vague. The debate has been further muddied by the discussion within shamanic research itself, as to whether shamanism might be a purely Siberian (or purely Evenki) phenomenon. More fundamentally, can it be said to exist at all?

The answer, and the relevance, lies in our frame of reference. In chapter 4 we looked at the belief systems of the Sámi, the Vikings' neighbours in Fenno-Scandia. Clearly, there were very close affinities between the patterns of ritual practice and spiritual perspective in these two cultures. Having moved on in this chapter to examine the circumpolar cultural complex of which the Sámi form a part, we have been able to make the following observations:

- here were different types of shamans, each with their specialised functions and skills
- shamans were often outspokenly ‘good’ or ‘evil’ in their functions (though this was nuanced), the former sometimes able to provide protection against the offensives of the latter
- shamans existed alongside other ritual specialists, and were not always the primary spiritual functionaries in their communities or societies
- shamans were often isolated figures on the fringes of their communities, hated and feared in equal measure, but simultaneously respected as – in a sense – they also operated at the innermost core of the social hierarchy
- sexual elements formed a major component of shamanic rituals across the entire circumpolar sphere, both in the form of erotic performances during rituals and in the shaman’s personal relationship to the spirit world
- in connection with this, special gender constructions and sexual identities were common features of shamanship
- violence and aggression were key features in the shamanic complex, with many (and in some cases the majority) of rituals being performed either for offensive or defensive purposes in such a context

If we return to the whole complex of *seiðr* and its related rituals that we encountered in chapter 3, it is clear that we can find comparisons at almost every turn when we look at circumpolar spirituality as outlined here. Many of these have been drawn out above, but we can conclude this chapter by taking two levels of analysis, one highly specific and one generalising from the most basic of shamanic definitions. We can begin with the former.

Two analogies on the functions of the seiðr-staff

If we look to the circumpolar ethnographies for help with detailed interpretational problems for the Viking Age material, perhaps the most appropriate case study would focus upon the single primary requisite of the *seiðr*-performer – the staff. We can make two analogies here, in an attempt to illuminate firstly the precise manner of its use, and secondly our understanding of its appearance.

Once again we can turn to the Chukchi, whom Bogoraz (1904–9: 484f, 522) observed also employing a staff for the purpose of divination. Two kinds of staff were used depending on the sex of the performer: a man used a walking-staff, while a woman used the long handle of a skin-scraper. Both of these objects tend to be around 50 cm long. The divination was usually performed over a fresh corpse, or above the supine body of a sick person. The key item of equipment was the *yitko'mk-u'kwun*, or 'swinging stone', which was sometimes literally a stone, often of unusual shape, but could also be the skull of a small animal, or a wooden image. The 'swinging stone' was suspended from the staff on a thin leather thong, the staff being held horizontally to allow the 'stone' to swing free. As the staff was held above the subject body, questions would be asked in response to which the 'stone' would either move or remain motionless. The path of its movements was interpreted by the performing shaman who held the staff. The performance took around two hours, with several changes of location as the ritual was repeated in different rooms of a building or outdoors. The questions were not necessarily spoken aloud, and could be formed solely in the mind of the shaman. The ritual was used to foretell the future, obtain clairvoyant information about far-off events, and occasionally to interrogate the dead.

The Chukchi believed that the inhabitants of the spirit world also employed such rituals, and told stories of the deadly *ke'let* using suspended human skulls in the same way, to predict the success of their hunt for souls on which to feed. Among the Koryak, female spirits performed divination in a similar fashion, but instead of a staff they used the erect penis of their 'husband', a human shaman (*i.e.* in 'real' terms the ritual was performed by the male shaman with his phallus; Bogoraz 1904–9: 486). The Kamchadal divined by tying a red cord to the leg of a female shaman, and observing how the limb moved under the influence of the spirit powers (Steller 1774: 277), while similar practices were observed among the Eskimo south of the mouth of the Yukon (Nelson 1899: 433). The related practice of divination by 'head-lifting' is also known from the arctic, including Siberia (*e.g.* Taylor 1989: 302ff).

Clearly, there are telling parallels with *seiðr* in the purpose and social context of the rituals, and of course the use of a staff. The suggestion of sexual and aggressive overtones is also striking. There is also an important Sámi parallel here, for the movements of the suspended object resemble the path taken by the *árpa* as it bounced across the symbols of the Sámi drum – both were interpreted by the 'shaman' and were the medium through which the message of the divination was discerned, as we have seen in chapter 4. Crucially, if we are to look to eastern Siberia for analogies to the *volva*'s staff, we may observe that the Chukchi practised shamanism that did *not* generally involve the use of drums (Bogoraz 1904–9: 356ff, 457; drums were known among them, but not employed in this kind of ritual). As we have seen, there is little in the written sources to suggest that drums were used in *seiðr* – the enigmatic *vétt* was probably not such an instrument – and there is no archaeological evidence for them at all. We are left then with two societies that practised their divination rituals without drums, and instead used a staff: is it reasonable to suggest that the Norse staff was used in the same manner as that of the Chukchi?

The idea of suspending something from the Norse staffs gains considerable support from the excavated material, if we here recall the perforations on the staff from Birka grave Bj. 845 and the other staffs with eyelets and loops of various kinds. Could these have been for the suspension of some object for divining, perhaps on a leather thong? Since most of the perforations are through elements of the 'handle', which as we have seen is often too large to actually hold, this would also explain how this was used. The staff could be held easily enough by the shaft, horizontally, with something suspended from the holes in the 'handle'. Its movements through the air could perhaps be 'read' in the same way as among the Chukchi. The fact that no such object has been found in the graves can be explained either by the possibility that it was of organic material, or else only fixed on when the ritual was to be performed.

The argument also works in two directions, without circularity. If the excavated objects are *seiðr*-staffs, then the fact that they have eyelets strengthens the parallel to the Chukchi and the idea that the Norse examples may have been used in the same way. Alternatively, if we start from analogy

to suggest that perhaps the *seiðr*-staffs in the written sources may have had something suspended from them – a notion that does not require any archaeological material – then this supports the interpretation of the excavated staffs with 'suspension loops' as being tools for the performance of *seiðr*.

If this may have been how the staff was used in the Viking Age, we have still not explained some aspects of its appearance and design. The general phallic overtones of these objects have been considered in chapter 3, but there is one feature that has not been subject to any close examination – the basket-like 'handle' that characterises so many of the staffs. As we have seen, even the basic function of this feature is far from certain. One the one hand similar elements are definitely found as the handles on other objects such as keys, but on the other hand they are also found in different contexts such as the links in the chain from Oseberg. On most of the staffs the 'basket' is at one end of the object in a natural handle position, but against this some of the 'baskets' are too broad to be held in the hand. I believe one of the keys to the meaning of this feature can be found in what is in many ways the most exceptional of all the staffs, that from Klinta on Öland.

On this piece, the 'basket' feature is not at one end of the object, but in fact 8 cm down the shaft below the plate bearing the model building. There is no doubt that it cannot be a handle, and in any case it is again too broad to be grasped comfortably in the hand. The interesting elements here are the bronze animal heads, from the mouths of which the iron strands of the 'basket' flow in a curving line. These beasts are found at both ends of the feature, connected one to the other by the iron rods (this is especially striking in the modern reproduction of this object, that has restored its original appearance; Lamm 2002).

Something almost exactly similar to this composition is also found in circumpolar material culture, where it has a very specific shamanic meaning.

Among the tribes of the Northwest Coast in Canada, a common theme of both myth and art is the process of communication between humans and animals. As we have seen above, in some ways these different beings are all

similar manifestations of the soul – all creatures being ‘human’ in their own worlds, and only appearing as ‘animals’ when they visit our own place of existence. The ability of these creatures to understand one another’s speech is therefore linked to the nature of the shamanic transformation, and the change in state from one form to another. This bond between the various beings is always shown in the same way in Northwest Coast art: by the depiction of a single, very long tongue stretching in a curving arc between the mouths of the creatures involved. This image of a shared tongue also signals that the beings concerned are in a state of trance, trading information and knowledge.

This motif is most commonly depicted on the rattles used by Northwest Coast shamans in their rituals (MacDonald 1996: 32f; Wardwell 1996: 86), but it is also found on weapons such as throwing sticks (Wardwell 1996: 221ff). In the revitalisation of Northwest Coast art that has taken place in the last few decades, the shared tongue is also among the most popular motifs (*e.g.* in Bill Reid’s magnificent bronze relief *Mythic Messengers* – MacDonald 1996: 226). The long, protruding tongue, offered in preparation for such a psychic exchange, is also one of the most common features of the ancestral spirit-beings on the totem poles.

If we return to the Viking-Age staffs, as we have seen in chapter 3 no other object besides that from Klinta has exactly this arrangement, as each is in fact unique. However, similar animal heads are found on other staffs, such as that from Birka Bj. 760, and on other ‘basket’ objects such as some of the keys. There are, of course, may questions here, such as the process of design evolution between the Klinta animals and the majority of the staffs on which the rods of the ‘basket’ are joined by polyhedral terminals. However, it may be significant that where the animals are present, they seem to be wolves, a creature that we know had very close connections to the sorceresses, Óðinn, the *berserkir* and the battlefield – it would be hard to find a more appropriate beast in the context of a proposed Viking-Age shamanism.

The idea of the ‘baskets’ as images of shamanic communication is tentative at best, but not far-fetched in view of all the other circumpolar parallels presented above. We must also consider that the feature clearly

meant something, and the challenge is to find a better explanation (see Heide's groundbreaking work here, discussed in chapter 8 below).

The shamanic motivation

To turn to the generalising level of comparison between the *seiðr* complex and the circumpolar religions, we can go back to basics. It has been said many times that, for all its various definitions, shamanism has one common factor in its motivation and meaning: it first evolved as a means of coping with the necessity of taking life in order to live oneself. In modern terms we might distinguish between the ending of one kind of life (animal) by another (human), but it is abundantly clear that prehistoric peoples did not necessarily do so. This kind of symbiosis had elements of necessity. The nomadic hunters who lived in the circumpolar north found themselves permanently on a knife-edge of subsistence, at the mercy of unpredictable weather and the movement of game. When the first comprehensive ethnographies were being compiled of Siberia and Greenland, for example, the constant presence of hunger was very obvious in the narratives collected.

Shamanism seems to have evolved as a means of providing confidence and certainty in situations where those things did not in fact exist. These kinds of belief system presuppose the existence of spiritual powers who will ensure that, if treated appropriately, game killed for food will later return, and allow the hunters to do the same again in future. The urgency of that task helps to explain the immense importance placed in the shaman by the community, and the central role that the whole spiritual complex played in maintaining the mental health of society in general.

All this is readily applicable to most of the arctic and sub-arctic cultures, but equally it is clear that Scandinavia was on the edge of the eco-system that gave rise to such beliefs. This is especially true of the Nordic peoples, the 'Vikings', with their settled lifestyle of generally agrarian pastoralism. In this light it is especially interesting to consider the most descriptive accounts of individuals like the *volur*, the supposed Norse 'shamans'. If we think for example of Þorbiorg lítil-volva from *Eiríks saga rauða*, it is significant that we encounter her in Greenland, the most extreme environment that the Norse ever settled. As Paul Buckland's

analyses have shown (2000 and references therein), the colonists there lived the most precarious of lives, in a climate where three bad years meant death by starvation. Remembering the shamanic core functions outlined above, we can look again at the reason why the farmers of the region summoned Þorbiorg: they wanted to ask about the season of illness and economic failure that they were suffering. In the saga she is pressed by desperate people to answer their need. Will the hard times continue? Will they survive? Þorbiorg reassures them that prosperity will return, and that they will flourish.

Catharina Raudvere (2001: 97–101) has made some interesting comments on the importance of prosperity in the complex of Nordic magic, linking in to idea of personified luck as a sorcerous attribute and what has been called an ‘economy of fortune’. This is essentially the same rationalisation of arbitrary climatic, floral and faunal circumstance that we have seen above. In relation to this we find the classic function of the classic shaman.

At this point it should come as no surprise that the image of the *volur* as they appear in the sagas fits almost exactly with the archetypal role of the shaman found throughout the circumpolar region. They are depicted as individual ritual specialists who are both necessary and feared, treated with simultaneous respect and contempt. They lead a somewhat peripatetic life on the fringes of society, while at the same time earning the patronage of the highest elites to whom their services were fundamental. They articulate a world-view to which the whole community was party, while guarding arcane knowledge of its depths known only to a few. As with circumpolar shamanism again, among the Norse there were clearly different kinds of ritual specialists, each with their own skills and areas of competence, and a terminology to match.

This emphasis on complexity and function is evident in all aspects of these belief systems: specialised sorcerers for specialised sorcery, interacting with very specific supernatural beings and powers, in specific contexts and social situations. In exploring the social role of *seiðr* performers, we can draw a comparison with Caroline Humphrey’s work among the Daur Mongols, when she noted perceptively that their shamans

were almost never discussed as a category, but were instead remembered as individuals (Humphrey & Onon 1996: 183). A similar view is repeated many times in works dealing with Siberian shamanism, and in my own research I have found the same to be true in modern Sápmi concerning stories of famous *noaidi*. It is therefore interesting to speculate whether such a perception may also have applied to the performers of *seiðr* in the Viking Age – a suggestion to which the individualistic treatments of them in the saga sources lends some support.

Towards a shamanic world-view of the Viking Age

Everything we know about shamanism tells us that, in the words of Thomas Dowson (1996: 469), it is "not something practised on certain days of the week; rather it provides a world-view that influences the way in which individual agents perceive and negotiate their place in that world". To suggest that something resembling 'shamanism' may have existed in Viking society is not enough – we must also seek to reconstruct the perception of reality that such an interpretation inevitably brings with it.

So far we have deconstructed every component of the *seiðr* complex – human, supernatural, and material – and sought parallels among the Sámi and circumpolar cultures. These comparisons demonstrate that the medieval descriptions of Viking-Age sorcery are not only plausible but actually entirely consistent with the spiritual practices of the far north. This brings us to a simple but important conclusion: that, in a perceptual sense, *seiðr* was real. It formed an actual part of the Viking-Age Scandinavians' mental universe, and in one way or another seems to have permeated a great many aspects of their lives. In modern analytical terms, it was a 'shamanic' belief system that can be naturally placed within the circumpolar cultural sphere while nonetheless possessing its own discrete character.

What we have not done so far is to see how these different ritual parts made a coherent whole, the world-view mentioned above. Aspects of this have been raised many times, making a tantalising series of links between the nature of Óðinn, the gender boundaries of *seiðr*, and the idea of shape-shifting transformation. These in turn lead to the rituals of violence and sex, and ultimately to the battlefield.

In the next chapter we shall draw these strands together and try to reconstruct the overall purpose of the *seiðr* complex, the systemically functional aspects of this shamanic network in an agrarian, settled culture. It is here that we find the confluence of the ‘religion’ and ‘war’ that we first encountered at the beginning, and it is here that we can explore what happened when this encounter took place.

6

The supernatural empowerment of aggression

Fundust þeir þar, er heitir Frekasteinn, ok tókst þar horð orrosta. Helgi gengr fram í gegnum fylkingar. Þar varð mikit mannfall. Þá sá þeir skjaldmeyjaflokk mikinn, svá sem í loga sæi.

They met at the place called Frekasteinn and a savage battle ensued. Helgi pushed forward through his opponents' ranks. A great many men fell there. Then they saw a large band of shield-maidens, and it was like looking into flames.

Volsunga saga 9; my translation after Byock 1990: 50

Seiðr and the world of war

When we have examined the *seiðr* complex directly in chapter 3, and in comparative contexts in chapters 4 and 5, two broad functional arenas have emerged for Norse sorcery in the Viking Age. This phenomenon has been observed before, and has been characterised in different ways. As we have seen, Strömbäck divided *seiðr* into 'black' and 'white' forms, as in Siberia; Tolley wrote of 'divinatory' and 'efficatory' practices. In this chapter I want to expand on this, and to propose an alternative interpretation.

As one of *seiðr*'s two branches we have what I have above called sorcery for 'domestic' purposes. However, while we have seen many examples of this we have also encountered Norse operative magic used in a different context, namely for violent ends. *Seiðr* was employed to attack others in spirit form, to remove a person's luck and drive them insane, to send the *gandir* on a nocturnal assault, even as a weapon in the war between the divine families. I would here extend this pattern of sorcerous aggression to form the other half of

the equation, and to argue that the second branch of *seiðr* concerned the world of war.

We can see this predisposition to violence even in the fundamental structure of *seiðr*, especially in its use by Óðinn. For example, if we interpret the World Tree in the sense of its etymology – Óðinn's horse, *i.e.* a symbol of the shamanic journey – then it is significant that the specific name used should be Yggr, 'Terrible One'. A variant of this, Yggiungr, 'Son of the Terrible One', is the name that Óðinn uses in *Grímnismál* when he reveals himself to Geirrøðr, at the moment when he declares his intention to murder him. Nothing less than the support of the worlds is named as the conduit for Óðinn's shamanic journeys in his persona as a killer. I would argue that this too is an indication of violent intent in the rituals of soul travel, and in view of its association with Yggdrasill this would seem to be of fundamental importance to the cosmological context of such sorcery.

One of the first observations here must be that the aggressive use of *seiðr* could operate at many levels, beginning with the personal and individual. We can see this in terms of the prosecution of grievance, and individual revenge killings or acts of violence off the battlefield are also recorded in some quantity. A typical example from *Laxdæla saga* (37), involving the *seiðmenn* Kotkell and his sons who have been discussed in other contexts in chapter 3, gives us further insight into the offensive practice of *seiðr*.

Following a prolonged period of troublesome activity, during which they have gained a reputation for malicious magic, the sorcerers are enlisted to strike a blow against a certain Hrútr, one of the parties involved in a dispute over stolen horses. At night, Kotkell, his wife Gríma and his two sons climb on to the roof of Hrútr's house, *ok gerðu þar seið mikinn*, 'and there began to make a great *seiðr*'. As mentioned above in the discussion of *seiðr*-songs, the *seiðlæti* that the sorcerers produce is pleasing to those inside the house, though only Hrútr himself understands what is going on. He forbids anyone to look outside, and orders everyone in the household to try to stay awake. Eventually everyone falls asleep, with the exception of Hrútr's youngest and favourite son Kári. The saga states that the boy is restless and cannot sleep, *því at til hans var leikr mikit*, 'because it was against him that the attack was directed'. Curiosity overcomes him and Kári goes outside, at which point the spell takes effect. The text uses a strange phrase to describe what happens:

hann gekk á seiðinn ok fell þegar dauðr niðr he walked into the *seiðr* and fell down dead at once *Laxdæla saga* (37); my translation

The next morning the boy's body is found lying a short distance from the door, and the sorcerers are gone. It is clear that in this instance the ritual has somehow laid some kind of killing field around the hall, combined with special songs that lure the intended victim to step into it, while at the same time lulling others to sleep.

A different kind of destructive ritual appears in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 79, when the *fjolkunnig* woman Þuríðr works sorcery against the anti-hero Grettir. The saga has earlier made it clear that she has special powers, especially connected to the perception of a person's *hamingja*. Having been cursed by the old woman and broken her leg in return, Grettir remains in his outlaw stronghold on Drangey island. Several months later, after her leg has healed, Þuríðr asks to be carried down to the shore to perform a curious ritual:

Nú var svá gort, sem hon beiddi, ok er hon kom til strandar, haltraði hon fram með sænum, svá sem henni væri vísat til. Þar lá fyrir henni rótartré svá mikit sem axlbyrðr. Hon leit á treit ok bað þá snúa fyrir sér; þat var sem sviðit ok gniðat oðrum megin. Hon lét telgja á lítinn flatveg, þar gniðat var; síðan tók hon kníf sinn ok reist rúnar á rótinni ok rauð í blóði sínu ok kvað yfir galdra. Hon gekk ofug ansœlis um tréit ok hafði þar yfir morg romm ummæli. Eptir þat lætr hon hrinda trénu á sjá ok mælti svá fyrir, at þat skyldi reka út til Drangeyjar, ok verði Gretti allt mein at.

What she asked was done, and when she came to the shore she limped along beside the sea as if something was guiding her. Lying before her there was a tree-trunk with its roots, as heavy as a man could carry. She looked at the tree and asked them to turn it over for her; it seemed to have been burned and scraped on the other side. She told them to carve a small smooth surface on it, where it had been scraped. Then she took her knife, cut some runes on the tree, smeared them with her blood, and chanted some *galdrar*. She walked backwards around the trunk going against the course of the sun, and pronounced many powerful charms. Afterwards she told them to push the trunk into the sea, that it should drift out to Drangey and cause Grettir every grief.

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar 79; translation after Fox & Hermann Pálsson 1974: 161

Several elements are interesting here: the evident authority of the sorceress who orders everyone else around, the notion that her path is directed by something outside herself, the liminal location of the intertidal zone, the inverted tree and the suggestion that other practices have been performed on it before (the burning and rubbing), the runes and *galdr*, the withershins movement, and the effecting of the spell by casting loose the tree. We can add here that the sorcery worked against Grettir eventually ensures his doom through the total failure of his luck. Catharina Raudvere (2001: 138) has argued that all these elements were intended by the medieval saga author to "make the story seem odd and old", but there is equally no reason why the tale should not actually *be* so.

Seiðr could also be used to cause misfortune in this way, or to instil a general sense of unease or restlessness. This was sometimes in so severe a form as to seriously disturb the victim. An example of this in a high-status context is the curse placed by Gunnhildr, the queen of Eiríkr blóðøx, who *lét þat seiða at Egill Skalla-Grímsson skydi aldri ró bíða á Islandi*, 'used *seiðr* to ensure that Egill Skalla-Grímsson would never know peace in Iceland' (*Egills saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 59).

Beyond these 'low-key' though no less deadly overtures, the violent dramas of *seiðr* seem however to have been enacted primarily on the larger stage of the battlefield. In the sections that follow we shall examine this in practice, beginning as in chapter 3 with supernatural agency and then progressing to its human, mortal counterpart. The supreme examples of otherworldly intervention in battle are naturally the *valkyrjur*, the warrior women who served Óðinn and gradually built up his armies of dead heroes to fight for him at the Ragnarok. From them we move to other non-human creatures that found a place on the battlefield, and so to the apparatus of sorcery employed for the projection of destruction. We shall consider demons and 'beings of witchcraft', spells for sorcerers and spells for warriors, and the active role of ritual specialists in combat. Alongside the latter were others whose participation in the fighting was more direct – the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, clad in animal skins and possessed by supernatural frenzy. They are also considered here in terms of shape-shifting and *seiðr*, of totemism and

ritual disguise. The chapter will then conclude with a deeper analysis of the dynamics of mass violence in Viking-Age society.

Valkyrjur, skaldmeyjar and *hjálmvitr*

The *valkyrjur* – valkyries – are of course one of the most well-known aspects of the Norse religion, and have captured the popular imagination since the early days of Viking studies (for the main studies, see Ström 1954; Andersson 1980; Quinn 2005, 2007; Näsström 2009: 153–74; Egeler 2011; Bek-Pedersen 2011: 14–55; Murphy 2013; Boyer 2014; Self 2014). However, the general image that we have of them today bears little resemblance to the *valkyrjur* as they appear in any but the latest written sources, and it is possible to trace the development of these female supernatural beings through several distinct phases.

The 'classic' version of the *valkyrjur* ultimately derives from the heroic poems of the Eddic corpus and their subsequent development into a standard literary motif in the sagas, while both of these traditions build on slightly earlier conceptions from the end of the Viking period. Here the *valkyrjur*'s main function seems to have been to select which warriors would die in battle, and to bring them accordingly to Óðinn; this is of course reflected in their name, as *valkyrja* means 'chooser of the slain'. Snorri records these aspects of them in *Gylfaginning* 36, and also notes that they served beer to Óðinn and the *einherjar* in Valholl. In *Oddrúnargrátr* (16) and *Volsungasaga* (1), they are referred to as *óskmeyjar*, 'wish-maidens' or 'wish-girls', a name that plays on their role as manifestations of Óðinn's commands and also on the poetic convention that they were objects of desire for the slain.

The names of the *valkyrjur* appear in a number of sources summarised below, in various combinations. In some sources their nature is made explicit, while in others they are merely mentioned in the context of the violently-dead and we must cross-reference the names to confirm that they are indeed *valkyrjur*. Their numbers vary. In *Grímnismál*, 13 *valkyrjur* appear together in a description of Valholl, while Snorri lists 16 in the same context; *Darraðarljóð* names six *valkyrjur*, while its prose accompaniment mentions double that number; in *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* they are 'three times nine'; there are 29 listed in *Heiti valkyrja*, with a few additional names from other *þulur* (plus some duplicates); several more appear in the heroic poems and

sagas, often in groups of nine or in the form of a named *valkyrja* with nine accompanying her. It is clear that there were very many of these beings, any number of whom could appear simultaneously or in combination.

By the time of Eivindr's mid-tenth-century *Hákonarmál*, they had already become "elegant abstractions … sitting high on their horses in full armour" (Ellis 1943: 69). These are the same *valkyrjur* that we see at a later date riding through the sky in *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 28, the sweat from their horses' manes falling as dew in the valleys and as hail in the upland forests over which they pass. When they return to Valholl, it is these women who appear as "fair attendants upon a dignified Óðinn" (Ellis 1943: 71).

At this period they also took on a semi-human aspect, and were depicted as tragic warrior women, doomed by their love for mortal men. Here we see a focus on their brightness and beauty – the flashing eyes and gleaming white skin mentioned in several sources such as the Helgi poems (summarised briefly by Damico, 1990: 181). These *skaldmeyjar*, 'shield-maidens' (also *valmeyjar*, 'battle-maidens', and *hjálmvitr*, 'helmet-creatures'), were to become a regular ingredient in the sagas that developed in the tradition of medieval Romance, in a manner similar to the use of *berserkir* as stock villains. This shield maiden trope has attracted an appropriately extensive literature, that can only be briefly touched upon here (found either as part of larger discussions of women in the Viking and early Middle Ages, *e.g.* Jesch 1991: 176–80; Clover 1993; Jochens 1996: 87–112, a particularly detailed treatment; several papers in Anderson & Swenson 2005; Jóhanna Katrín Fríðriksdóttir 2013: 10–11, 114–6, 120–7; or in a more specific context, *e.g.* Clover 1986; Præstgaard Andersen 1982, 2002; Sawyer 2003; Ney 2004; Klos 2006; Self 2014; Kjesrud 2014; Jesch 2015: 104–7; Redon 2017: 27–40; Gardeła 2013c, 2017b, 2018, another comprehensive analysis); full references to the sources mentioned below can be found in these works.

Shield maidens and other female warriors appear several times in the heroic poems of the Eddic tradition, in skaldic poems such as Þórbjorn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* and Eivindr Finnsson's *Hákonarmál*, and they occur with some frequency in the poetic citations of Snorri's *Edda*. In the Sagas of Icelanders, by contrast, armed women are not encountered at all, other than in isolated contexts of self-defence, momentary rage or planned revenge. One graphic example comes from *Eiríks saga rauða* (11), when the Greenlanders

who have journeyed to North America come into conflict with the indigenous peoples there. A pregnant woman, Freydís, cannot keep up with her retreating countrymen and is in danger of being surrounded by the Native Americans. Retrieving the sword of a fallen Norseman, she turns to face her attackers and bares her breasts, slapping them with the blade. The Native Americans are terrified at the sight and flee – a fortuitous reaction that has been explained in terms of literary motif as a transgression of social norms (Falk 2015).

The single exception would seem to be a sorceress described in *Ljósvetninga saga* (ch. 20), who is dressed in trousers (conventional male attire, as we have seen), wears a helmet and holds an axe, which she uses in a violent ritual. However, shield maidens appear frequently in the *fornaldarsögur*, such as *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Sogubrot af nokkrum fornkonungum*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, *Hrómundar saga*, in tales such as *?áttr af Ragnars sonum*, as well as in the chivalric sagas and elsewhere. The same theme was also taken up by Saxo (*e.g.* III: 68–9), with many descriptions of shield maidens, operating in different contexts throughout the early parts of the work (especially in book VII).

To summarise these texts briefly, such women appear singly or in small bands, the latter sometimes specifically composed of female warriors, and at other times more integrated into general fighting forces. In individual cases, they may lead armies and direct campaigns, assuming positions of command. Occasionally these women are described as having different – and sometimes transgressive – attributes of appearance (wearing male clothing, for example). They fight both with and without armour. For some of these women, the process of taking on this identity involves a change of personal name. The tales adopt a variety of moral and social viewpoints, sometimes framing the women as rare exceptions to their sex, and in other instances giving little sign that they were regarded as out of the ordinary. In several of these sources, the action is set not just in the Viking Age, but also in the centuries preceding it as far back as the Migration Period.

From the heroic poems and sagas, it is these dramatic figures such as Brynhildr, Kára, Sváva and Sigrún that are the direct ancestors of the valkyries of the National Romantic period, known through Wagner and the fantasies of so many artists (Simek lists the main works of this time that were inspired by

the *valkyrjur*, 1993: 349f; see also Henningsen *et al.* 1997 for opera costumes and other visual arts).

Female warriors in reality

While we minimal evidence from the medieval Old Norse textual corpus that Viking-Age women actually fought on the battlefield, there are an interesting handful of non-Scandinavian and near-contemporary sources that may mention such people.

There are two clear examples, the earliest coming from the Byzantine world. Probably around the 1090s, John Skylitzes compiled the records of Imperial military campaigns from earlier times, including an account of a war with the Scandinavian-dominated 'Rus that took place in 971 (Wortley 2010: 290; see Duczko 2004 and Androshchuk *et al.* 2016 for context). Following a 'Rus defeat, the Byzantines are looting the enemy corpses on the battlefield when they find the bodies of women in armour, who they are quite clear had been fighting them together with the men. The information is given matter-of-factly, as part of the general account, and is not elaborated in any way (see Kaldellis 2013 for a discussion on the reliability or otherwise of Skylitzes' sources).

The second example comes from the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* ('the War of the Irish with the Foreigners'), the same twelfth-century text that mentions Ota giving her answers on the altar at Clonmacnoise. In its relations of the Viking attacks on Munster in the late tenth century (Todd 1867: 41), the *Cogadh* lists no less than 16 raiding flotillas with their commanders' names, the last of which is given as 'the fleet of the Inghen Ruiadh', translating as the 'Red Girl' (or 'Red Daughter') and apparently referencing her hair colour (Hennessy 1872; see also Downham 2014 for the historicity of the text). A later entry (Todd 1867: 207) records that her two sons died in combat a half-century later at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. In just two sentences, this woman appears not only as a Viking herself but also a ship's captain, a fleet commander, and the mother of Vikings. She is not further commented upon in the text, simply included with the other raiders in a dry description. Further support for her existence is also provided by the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, a difficult seventeenth-century English translation of a now-lost medieval Irish original. Its entries are hard to date, but they include a list of Viking fleets very similar to that of the *Cogadh* in which one raiding force is commanded by the

‘Read Daughter’ (the *Annals* are copied in Jacobean spelling; Murphy 1896: 134). In a link to the more critically problematic sources, there has also been a suggestion that the Red Daughter is the same person as the warrior woman Rusila or Rusla, meaning ‘Red’, in Saxo (Books IV, VII and VIII).

Two other Irish sources are also of relevance, though more ambiguous. The *Annals of Ulster* (339, 533) twice refer to individual female war commanders by the descriptor ‘the Maid’, first in 881 in battle against the Irish and then in 1098 while fighting ‘foreigners’. Given the time gap they are clearly not the same person and the ethnic context shifts, but women are explicitly described as leading Viking-Age military forces. In addition, the *Annals of Inisfallen* for 905 (143) mention a vaguely-defined army of barbarians who are probably Vikings, plundering along the northern Mediterranean shore. Part of the force is made up of “close-cropped women”, not specifically described as warriors but clearly understood to be unconventional and noted in a warlike context.

Finally, ‘Danish’ women are explicitly mentioned as being part of the Viking besieging army at Paris in late 885. In Abbo’s eye-witness account (Book I, v. 124–34), the women are clearly present on the ships, physically very close to the fighting but not obviously part of it, though they aggressively encourage the Viking men in combat (and thereby interestingly provide a real correlate to another prominent female trope from the Old Norse corpus, that of the ‘whetter’; cf. Jochens 1996: ch. 7 & 8).

In 2017, the debate on ‘real’ warrior women in the Viking Age took a new turn with the publication of a genomic analysis of the skeleton in a burial from one of the Birka cemeteries, Bj. 581, which had long been held up as an ‘archetypal’ warrior grave of the mid-tenth century. Always assumed to be male, the DNA study showed conclusively that the person was female, with obvious implications for the identity of the dead. A lively international discussion ensued, and several comparable examples of what appeared to be female burials with extensive weapon sets were located in Norway. None of this proves the existence of the saga shield maidens, but it does provide an interesting new perspective on the possible practical involvement of Viking-Age Scandinavian women in warfare at this time (see Hedenstierna *et al.* 2017 and Price *et al.* 2019 for full references to the very extensive debates around this controversial grave).

The valkyrjur in context

In mythological terms, behind the two later archetypes of the warrior-women and hand-maidens of Óðinn it is possible to perceive an earlier form of the *valkyrjur*, certainly current in the early Viking Age and probably long before. These beings are more complex than their literary successors, taking on aspects of different kinds of supernatural creatures, varying their function and behaviour with circumstance. They are also far more fearsome than the *skaldmeyjar*, and their associations with the battlefield seem more firmly anchored in the grim realities of early medieval combat.

This appears most clearly in the *Darraðarljóð*, the poetic interpolation in *Njáls saga* that is presented as concerning the Battle of Clontarf outside Dublin in 1014. The dating is important, because from its internal references Poole (1991: 120–4) has argued convincingly that the poem in fact dates to the early tenth century and refers to a completely different Irish battle that took place in 919. The prose text of the saga describes how, as the clouds of war gather over Ireland, a man in Caithness looks through the window of an outbuilding and sees twelve women inside. They set up a terrible loom, over which they begin to chant. Though it stretches to some eleven strophes, the poem and its introduction are worth quoting in full:

Mannahofuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór monnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en or fyrir hræl. Þær kváðu þá vísur nokkurar: Men’s heads served as loomweights, and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the beater, and an arrow as the pin beater. Then they spoke some verses:

Vítt er orpit	Far and wide
fyrir valfalli	with the fall of the dead
rifs reiðský:	a warp is set up:
rignir blóði.	blood rains down.
Nú er fyrir geirum	Now, with the spears,
grár upp kominn	a grey woven fabric
vefr verþjóðar,	of warriors is formed,
er vinur fylla	which women friends
rauðum vepti	of Randvér’s killer [Óðinn]
Randvés bana.	complete with a red weft.
Sjá er orpinn vefr	The fabric is warped
ýta þǫrmum	with men’s intestines
ok harðkljáðr	and firmly weighted
hǫfðum manna;	with men’s heads;
eru dreyrrekin	blood-stained spears serve
dǫrr at skǫptum,	as heddle rods,

járnvarðr yllir	the shed rod an iron-bound axe
en ǫrum hrælaðr.	and arrows are pin beaters.
Skulum slá sverðum	With our swords we must beat
sigrvef þenna.	this fabric of victory.
Gengr Hildr vefa	Hildr goes to weave
ok Hjǫrþrimul,	and Hjǫrþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,	Sanngríðr, Svipul,
sverðum tognum:	with unsheathed swords:
skapt mun gnesta,	the shaft will break,
skjǫldr mun bresta,	the shield will shatter,
mun hjalmgagarr	the helmet-hound [sword] will
í hlíf koma.	gnaw through armour.
Vindum vindum	Let us wind, let us wind
vef darraðar	the web of war [or: web of the pennant]
þann er ungr konungr	which the young king
átti fyrri:	had before:
fram skulum ganga	we must go
ok í folk vaða	and advance into the throng
þar er vinir várir	where our friends
vápnum skipta.	set weapon against weapon.
Vindum vindum	Let us wind, let us wind
vef darraðar	the web of war [or: web of the pennant]
ok siklingi	and follow the prince
síðan fylgjum:	afterwards:
þar sá bragna	there Gunnr and Gǫndul,
blóðgar randir	who protected the king,
Gunnr ok Gǫndul	saw men’s shields
þær er grami hlífðu.	covered in blood.
Vindum vindum	Let us wind, let us wind
vef darraðar	the web of war [or: web of the pennant]
þar er vé vaða	there where the standards
vígra manna:	of fighting men go forth:
látum eigi	let us not permit
líf hans farask;	his life to be lost;
eiga valkyrjur	the valkyrjur have
vals um kosti.	their choice of the slain.
Þeir munu lýðir	Those men will
lǫndum ráða	rule the lands
er útskaga	who dwelt until this time
áðr um byggðu:	on the outlying headlands:
kveð ek ríkum gram	I say that death is decreed
ráðinn dauða;	for the mighty king;

nú er fyrir oddum jarlmaðr hniginn.	now the earl has sunk down before the spears.
Ok munu Írar angr um bíða þat er aldri mun ýtum fyrnask: Nú er vefr ofinn en vǫllr roðinn; mun um land fara læspjǫl gota.	And the Irish will undergo grief which will never fade in men's memories: now the fabric is woven and the field dyed red; the tidings of men's destruction will travel throughout the land.
Nú er ógurligt um at lítask er dreyrug ský dregr með himni: mun lopt litat lýða blóði er spár várar springa kunnu.	Now it is fearsome to gaze around as blood-red clouds gather in the sky: the heaven swill be stained with men's blood when our prophecies can spread abroad.
Vel kváðu vér um konung ungan; sigrljóða fjǫld syngjum heilar: en hinn nemi, er hyrir á, geirljóða fjǫld ok gumum skemti.	We spoke well of the young king; let us sing with good fortune many songs of victory: and let him who listens learn many a spear-song and entertain men.
Ríðum hestum hart út berum bruðnum sverðum a braut heðan.	Let us ride out fast on our bare-backed horses, with brandished swords away from here.

Rigu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok haði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr.

Then they tore the woven cloth down and ripped it apart, each one retaining the piece which she was holding. Then he left the window and went back home, while they mounted their horses and rode six to the south and the other six to the north.

Njáls saga 157; text and translation after Poole 1991: 116–9 with amendments after Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson 1960: 349ff and my own translations; for the interpretation of *járnvarðr yllir* and other amendments to strophe 2, see Guðjónsson 1989

The meaning of the weaving motifs is discussed in more detail below, but in the present context we can note that the *valkyrjur* who speak the verses have none of the noble refinement of the later shield-maidens. In their exultation in slaughter and thirst for blood, and eagerness to engage in combat, these are beings far cruder than their later namesakes, suggesting that the *valkyrjur* once possessed a more terrible aspect as female demons of carnage. It may be that sources such as *Darraðarljóð* give us some of the best indicators of how the battle spirits of the Viking Age may have been conceived at the time, and we can note that this would make them more in keeping with the female agents of destruction that appear in other European traditions, such as the Red Women and the Badb in Ireland – is it a coincidence here that the poem has an Irish context (cf. Donahue 1941; Krappe 1926 considers other Indo-European parallels)?

There are echoes of these kinds of creatures in the later poems such as *Hákonarmál*, in which the *valkyrjur* take active pleasure in killing the king at Óðinn's command. The blood-drenched cloth also resembles motifs from *Sturlunga saga* when such an object is waved by supernatural women over those about to fight, and in which a similar group of women sit inside a house soaked with blood. The same motif appears in *Víga-Glúms saga* (21) when two women splash blood from a trough over a troubled district (cf. Ellis 1943: 69).

These early *valkyrjur* are also notable for the blend of associations and abilities that they possess – for example, the women of *Darraðarljóð* weave like the *nornir*, and are clearly connected with fate. The blurred distinctions between different categories of female supernatural beings are exemplified in the prose and verse of *Volundarkviða*, one of the earliest Eddic poems that perhaps dates from the ninth century. Here, the three daughters of Hloðver and Kiárr are described as *valkyrjur* in the prose introduction, which is a later addition (Neckel – 1913: 82 – has noted how the word actually occurs very seldom in the poetry). However, despite this description they again occupy themselves with weaving. Snorri specifically says that 'the youngest *norn*', Skuld, also rides with the *valkyrjur* to collect the slain and decide the outcome of the fighting (*Gylfaginning* 36).

In *Volundarkviða* the *valkyrjur* are also depicted as flying creatures, but here they are 'swan-maidens', with feather garments that they wear to fly away to battle. The same feature is found in *Hrómundar saga Greipssonar* (7),

where a swan-maiden flies over the hero's head in battle and chants spells for his protection (Ellis 1943: 70). Perhaps the 'early' *valkyrjur* possessed an innate ability to fly, but also used horses either in the air or on the ground.

Some sources blend the different archetypes. For example, in the epigraph to this chapter when Sigrún arrives with her fellow *skaldmeyjar-valkyrjur* in *Volsunga saga* 9, we are told that looking at them is 'like staring into flame' – an image that hints at the more terrible figures that probably belonged to the earliest, oral forms of the tale. To a medieval saga audience it would also have had definite connotations of battle, by association to a common motif whereby imminent combat is heralded by the light glancing off the equipment of an approaching host. The classic example is a purely Nordic image from *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (87), with Snorri's description of the oncoming English army at Stamford Bridge: the sun on their weapons reminds the Norwegians of the reflections from a field of broken ice.

It is possible too that the names of the *skaldmeyjar-valkyrjur* are older than the poems in which they appear. Kára ('Curl'), for example, has been compared by Höfler (1952) to the runic name Óðinkar, 'the one with Óðinn's curls' – another aspect of the god. Often, the *valkyrjur* in the heroic poems are reincarnations of others, moving from supernatural to human forms and back again (Sigrún is Sváva reborn, Brynhildr was once Sigrdrífa, and so on).

In Snorri's description of the battle of Hjaðningavíg in *Skáldskapamál* 50, the *valkyrja* Hildr (in semi-human form as the daughter of Hogni) displays several interesting characteristics. Firstly she is the cause of the battle itself, because it is joined by her father in revenge for her abduction by a rival king – the familiar pattern of desire leading to slaughter (in the version in *Flateyjarbók*, it is Óðinn who ordains the battle; see also Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*). After fighting all day, the kings retire to their ships, but Hildr revives all those who have fallen and the battle begins again next day. This continues day after day, with not only the dead but all their weapons and shields turning to stone until the following dawn, when Hildr brings them back to life and makes their armaments usable again. Snorri relates that the battle is doomed to continue until the Ragnarok itself. Not only is this evidence of the *valkyrja*'s immense power, but it also implies an Óðinnic healing function that is not often remarked upon. This may also lie behind the name of the *valkyrja* Eir from the *þulur*, meaning 'Helper' or 'Mercy' (see Müller 1976).

There are suggestions that at least some of the *valkyrjur* possessed knowledge of runes, as we see in the most detailed list of runic properties contained in one of the early Eddic poems, *Sigrdrífomál*. Here, it is the *valkyrja* Sigrdrífa that advises Sigurðr on the various types of runes and their magical properties, in a manner more commonly associated with Óðinn himself (Sigrdrífr's independence in this respect finds another echo in the fact that she has been exiled from Valholl because she disobeyed Óðinn and killed the wrong king in a battle). A similar range of runic knowledge is exhibited by *valkyrjur* like Brynhildr in the heroic poems, and a general skill in sorcery is also seen in *Volundarkviða*.

There are also hints in the Eddic poems of other, more oblique activities of the *valkyrjur*. Naming rituals have received comparatively little attention in Viking studies (though see Sundqvist 2002: 151–6, 325), but in the context of the kinds of Sámi naming-customs examined in chapter 4 we can note an interesting example from *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar*. In the prose introduction to the second section of the poem, the un-named son of Hiorvarðr and Sigrlinn is sitting out on a burial mound (note the context) when he sees nine *valkyrjur* ride past. The most striking of them, Sváva, stops and speaks to him, addressing him as Helgi and thus bestowing his name (*ibid*: 6f). He refuses it unless he can possess her also, and as a result she becomes his personal protector in battle.

This theme of a *valkyrja* linking herself to a single mortal, as opposed to directly serving Óðinn either in a general battlefield capacity or as a hand-maiden in Valholl, is a consistent feature of the heroic poems. Neckel (1913: 82f) has suggested that the protective supernatural woman was a later development of the original 'battle-demon *valkyrja*', but I feel that there are grounds for re-evaluating this. We should not be too hasty in assuming that the relationship to a heroic individual is solely a later addition to the *valkyrja*-concept, because there are sharp similarities between these patterns and others discernable in Sámi and circumpolar religion. This is seen particularly clearly in the fact that the Nordic heroes seem to view their *valkyrja*-protectors as a kind of spirit-wife, in the same sense as we have seen among shamans in Siberia. In *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 7, Helgi greets Sváva the first time he sees her as *brúðr biartlitoð*, 'radiant bride', and a similar relationship occurs between Sigrún and the later Helgi. This relationship is implicitly sexual in

several of the poems – when Helgi dies, the grief-stricken Sigrún even wants to share his bed in the burial mound (*Helgakvíða Hundingsbana II*: 47) – and this is again matched in Siberia. When the dead lovers are later reincarnated, they retain their natures as respectively human and *valkyrja*, so the character of the relationship is also perpetuated. The fact that all of these spirit-partners protect their mate in battle must surely be of special significance here.

The same phenomenon is seen in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in the late tenth-century *lausavísur* in which Gísli relates the dreams that plague him over a long period (ch. 22–34; Skjaldedigtning BI: 96–104). A woman covered in blood appears to him in his sleep, and splashes the same substance all over him, while a second dream-woman on a grey horse is referred to as Gísli's *brúðr*, 'bride'. The horse-woman appears as a protector, forecasting his future and the date of his death, providing him with counsel to ensure his survival until then, and promising that afterwards he will come to her hall. A sexual relationship with this spirit-woman is very clear, as the only attribute of the hall that is mentioned is a bed with soft down pillows, and she even says that he will possess both 'wealth and the woman'. In some way the woman of blood is a rival to the other female being, and she appears again to him at the last in a manner more terrible than before: with bloody hands she washes his head until his hair is completely red, and then encloses his head in a blood-stained hood. Thereafter he dreams of the battle that will be his end, and of the other spirit-woman weeping.

Gísli's dream-women share characteristics of most of the *valkyrjur* archetypes mentioned above – the focus on bloody death, protection, a suggestion of sexual alliance and a marital relationship, a grey steed. The rivalry has been noted by Ellis (1943: 73), who finds a parallel in the thwarted love of giantesses for heroes under a *valkyrja*'s protection (*e.g. Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 24; prose introduction to *Helreið Brynhildar*). The sexual themes are made clear in other, more general contexts too, for example in *Háttatal* 49 when Hildr's choosing of the slain is described in terms of her preparing a bed for them.

The *valkyrjur*'s many identities extend to other media. The idea that the *valkyrjur* greeted the slain in Valholl with horns of mead has led to the interpretation of a number of archaeologically-recorded images from the Viking Age as representations of these beings. Scenes of this kind – a woman

with a drinking horn standing in front of a rider – appear on several of the picture-stones from Gotland, including some of those with the eight-legged horse discussed in the previous chapter. Together with rigged sailing ships, these women in fact form one of the most consistent motifs on the stones (a range of examples is given in Lindqvist 1941–42). The iconography occasionally differs, as on stone I from Lärbro Hammars which shows a woman holding a flaming torch as ship full of warriors comes ashore (Lindqvist 1942: 83–7). The suggestion that these figures probably really are *valkyrjur* is strengthened by one of the horn-offering women who also appears to be wearing a helmet, shown on stone III from Lilbjärs in Stenkyrka parish (Lindqvist 1941: Fig. 104; Göransson 1999: 66).





Fig. 6.1 A gilded silver figurine of ninth-century date, 3.4 cm tall, found by metal detector in 2012 at Hårby, near Roskilde, Denmark (photo by John Lee, National Museum of Denmark, used by kind permission).

The images on the picture-stones have in turn guided the interpretation of small cast silver pendants in the form of women, found in a number of Viking-Age female graves. Depicted in profile, the women appear almost identical to

those on the Gotlandic memorials, and the pendant figures too are sometimes cast with a drinking horn. Examples are known from graves Bj. 825 and 968 from Birka (Arwidsson 1989: 58ff), found during Stolpe's nineteenth-century excavations, and more than a hundred years later fragments of the moulds that cast them were recovered from settlement remains in the urban area (Ambrosiani & Eriksson 1994: 25ff; 1996: 26f). Similar figures, in these cases holding horns, have also been found at two sites on Öland including the hoard at Klinta, near the grave discussed in chapter 3 (Graham-Campbell 1980a: 154f), and in a number of other contexts.



Fig. 6.2 A Viking-Age gilded silver mount from the manor at Tissø on Sjælland, Denmark (photo National Museum of Denmark, used by kind permission).

We should also note the presence in the Scandinavian Viking-Age archaeological record of large numbers of armed figures portrayed in metalwork, and interpreted as women on the basis of gendered conventions in

the depiction of hairstyle and clothing (see general discussion in Göransson 1999; Back Danielsson 2007; and Helmbrecht 2011 for these figures specifically). These include the dramatic three-dimensional figurine from Hårby (Henriksen & Vang Petersen 2013; Fig. 6.1) but also numerous mounts from Denmark and eastern England depicting individuals both on horseback and standing, bearing shields, swords, and lances (no systematic survey of these finds has yet been published, but see Margeson 1997: 12; Vierck 2002: 20, 28; Helmbrecht 2011: 65–74, 127–8; Pentz 2017; Gardela 2018; Fig. 6.2).

Something more definite can perhaps be read from the figures on the Oseberg tapestry which, as we have seen in chapter 3 in the section on masks, include a woman with the head of a bird and another who appears to be wearing the skin of a wild boar (Hougen 1940: 104; Ingstad 1995: 143). The boar-woman is holding a shield – is this one of the *skaldmeyjar*? Both figures may represent transformed *valkyrjur*, or perhaps other kinds of female shape-shifters.

However, there is no reason why every such female figure should be interpreted in the same way, and there is a danger that merely the identification of a woman's image when combined with certain contexts (graves, picture-stones, etc) leads to an automatic assumption that these are *valkyrjur*. This is the same problem as with the statuettes of 'gods' discussed in chapter 3. We cannot even be sure that these icons signified 'women' at all (see Göransson 1999 for a re-assessment of such female imagery, including the alleged '*valkyrjur*', in the context of gender construction and the body). The horn-offering gesture in particular is known to have embodied a great deal of symbolism in the early medieval period, as has been explored at length by Michael Enright (1996). Connected with formalised notions of the obligations of aristocratic hospitality, this belongs in the arena of the heroic ideal and the changing social balance between individual and collective identities (cf. Herschend 1997a & 1998a). It is entirely possible that the '*valkyrjur*' images should be seen in this context instead, and it is equally likely that they refer to all these things simultaneously.

So what *were* the *valkyrjur* in the early Viking Age, and how should we interpret them in the light of the sorcery that we have studied in preceding chapters? One point of entry to this problem is through their names. These have long been recognised as embodiments of their nature, but a detailed study

of them has never been made in terms of the specific functions that each *valkyrja* may have performed. In a similar manner to the review of Óðinn-names in chapter 3, we can thus attempt some categorisation of them in an effort to shed some light on this question.

The names of the valkyrjur

In all I have been able to trace 52 individually-named *valkyrjur*. The list in Table 6.1 is based primarily on the Eddic poems, the *þulur* and the skaldic verses. With a few exceptions I have omitted references to saga prose, and unattributed skaldic poetry from sagas; datings of the skaldic verses follow Finnur Jónsson's edition.

Among the kennings I have included those which use a *valkyrja*-name synonymous with battle in a manner which may refer either to the *valkyrja* or to combat itself (*e.g.* Gunnr, in *gunnvegr*, 'battle-wall' [shield] from Þjóðólfr's *Haustlong*). I follow Meissner (1921) here in arguing that the *valkyrja* connotation was an inalienable part of the poet's decision to employ specifically these terms rather than the many other words for battle which do not hold such associations, and that these therefore are what I have here termed *valkyrja*-kennings. I have not included *valkyrja*kennings for 'man/warrior' or 'woman', for reasons explained below.

The translations are my own, taking account of the critical notes on the respective texts and the sometimes strongly varying interpretations given there.

As with the names of Óðinn, it is possible to find several clear categories in the *valkyrjur*-names. Seven of these beings have names that stand simply as embodiments of battle and war itself, but this low number belies the fact that two of them – Gunnr and Hildr – are among the most widely used. Three other names refer to victory. Others seem to represent simply destruction, such as Herja ('Devastater') and Sanngríðr ('Very Violent'). The noise and chaos of combat is invoked in eleven names such as Hjalmþrimul ('Helmet-Clatter'), Tanngniðr ('Teeth-Grinder'). The *valkyrjur*'s role as hostesses of the dead, perhaps with a slight sexual charge, is found in two names. There are also purely poetic constructions, such as the two shield-maidens from *Volundarkviða*.

No less than eight *valkyrjur* have spear-names, a suitable link to the holy weapon of Óðinn. Then we have specific names that could refer to precise actions, to a discrete function that these individual *valkyrjur* could have

performed. These include Eir (‘Helper’), Hrund (‘Pusher’) and Sváva (‘Sleep-Maker’, *i.e.* ‘Killer’). Two names refer to something that pushes down a shield; in one of these, Randgníðr or ‘Shield-Scraper’, we can almost hear the *valkyrja*’s nails rake the wooden board.

Mist (‘Cloud’) presumably fogs a warrior’s mind, and other Óðinnic functions like this are also found in two names which are resemble those found in lists of spells – Herfjotur the ‘War-Fetter’ and Hlokk the ‘Chain’. The name of the *valkyrja* Þogn (‘Silence’) graphically represents the end of the fighting. Ráðgríðr (‘Counsel-Truce’) perhaps brings a different kind of peace.

Table 6.1 The names of the valkyrjur.

Name	Meaning	Sources
Brynhildr	Bright Battle, Armour Battle	*Helreið Brynhildar* prose; *Dráp Niflunga* prose*; Grípisspá* 27, 35; *Guðrúnarkviða I* 22f, 25, 27, prose *& II* 27*; Brot at Sigurðarkviða* 3, 8, 10, 14; *Sigurðarkviða in scamma* 3, 15, 19, 30; *Oddrúnargrátr* 16ff, 20
Eir	Helper	*Ásynja heiti*
Geirahod	Spear-Battle	*Grímnismál* 36 (variant); *Orrostu heiti*
Geiravor	Spear-Goddess	*Heiti valkyrja*
Geirdríful	Spear-Flinger	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Orrostu heiti*
Geir-Róta	Spear-Disorder	Hallfrøðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld (c. 990), *Hákonardrápa* 2
Geirskogul	Spear-Shaker, Spear-Battle	*Voluspá* 30; *Heiti valkyrja*; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *Hákonarmál* 12
Geirvífa	Spear-Wife	Goþþormr sindri (mid-10th C), *Hákonardrápa* 8
Geirolul	Spear-Waver, Spear-Alu*	*Grímnismál* 36 (variant)
Geir[r]onul	Spear-Charger	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36 (variant)

Guðr	Battle, War	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36
Gunnr	Battle, War	*Helgakvíða Hundingsbana* II: 7; *Voluspá* 30; *Darraðarljóð* 5; *Háttatal* 61, 92; Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni (c. 900), *Haustlong* 1; Þórbjorn hornklofi (c. 900), *Glymdrápa* 6; Egill Skallagrímsson (c. 925), *lausavísur* 12; Hásteinn Hrómundarson halta (before 955), *lausavísur* 2, 4, 5; Hrómundr halti (c. 955), *lausavísur* 1; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *lausavísur* 2; Glúmr Geirason (c. 970), *Gráfeldardrápa* 3; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 975), *Drápa* on Hákon jarl; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 34; Hallfrøðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld (late 10th C), *lausavísur* 12, 13; Holmgongu-Bersi Véleifsson (late 10th C), *lausavísur* 6; Hallfrøðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld (1001), *Óláfsdrápa* 6; Ólafr Haraldsson inn helgi (c. 1010) *lausavísur* 5; Haldórr ókristni (c.1010), *Eiríksfløkkr* 8; Eiríkr viðsjá (1014), *lausavísur* 6; Sigvatr Þórðarson (1016), *Nesjavísur* 8; Óttarr svarti (c. 1023), *Hofuðlausn* 2, 7; Þórfinnr munnr (c.1025), *lausavísur* 1; Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskáld (c. 1025), *Þórgeirsdrápa* 6; Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson (c. 1031), Poem on Gizurr Gullbrárskáld; Sigvatr Þórðarson (c. 1040), *Erfi drápa Ólafs helga* 17; Þórleikr fagri (1051), *Flokk* on Sven Ulfsson 5; Sigvatr Þórðarson (early 11th C), *lausavísur* 4; Arnórr Þórðarson jarlaskáld (11th C), *Þórfinnsdrápa* 8; Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinsson (c.1145), *Háttalykill* 3a, 16a, 26b, 33a; Einarr Skúlason (1153), *Geisli* 47, 52; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *Sigurðardrápa* 5; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *Øxarflokkr* 3; Gamli kanóki (12th C), *Harmsól* 42; Haukr Valdísarson (12th C), *Íslendingadrápa* 3; Þórkell Gíslason (12th C), *Búadrápa* 11; Sigvatr Sturluson (1212), *lausavísur* 1; Ingjaldr Geirmundarson (1244), *Atloguflokkr* 1, 4, 6; Skáld-Hallr (1246), *Brandsdrápa* 6; Sturla Þórðarson (1262), *Hrynhenda* 17; Sturla Þórðarson (late 12th C), *Hrafnsmál* 20
Goll	Tumult, Battle	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36; *Orrostu heiti*
Gondul	Wolf, Staff, Staff-Bearer, Wand-Wielder?	*Voluspá* 30; *Darraðarljóð* 5; *Heiti valkyrja*; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 59; Egill Skallagrímsson (938), *lausavísur* 28; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *Hákonarmál* 1, 10; Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson (c. 982), *lausavísur* 4; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 7; Tindr Hallkelsson (c. 987), *Drápa* on Hákon jarl 5, 6; Þórðr Kolbeinsson (c. 1009), *Gunnlaugsdrápa ormstungu*; Sigvatr Þórðarson (1016), *Nesjavísur* 6; Óttarr svarti (c. 1023), *Hofuðlausn* 2; Haldórr skvaldri (c. 1120), *Útfarardrápa* 7; Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinsson (c.1145), *Háttalykill* 41b; *Ólafs drápa Tryggvasonar* (12th C), 11; Haukr Valdísarson (12th C), *Íslendingadrápa* 20; Hallar-Steinn (12th C), *Rekstefja* 11, 18; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), Unprovenanced poems 4, 17; Gunnlaugr Leifsson (before 1218), *Merlínúspá I*: 34, 64; Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld (1240), *Hrynhent* poem 11; Sturla Þórðarson (1263-4), *Hákonarflokkr* 10; Gizurr Þorvaldsson (13th C), *lausavísur* 1
Herfjortur	Host-Fetter, War-Fetter	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36

Herja	Devastater	*Heiti valkyrja*
Herþogn	Army-Hostess	*Orrostu heiti*
Hervor alvitr	Host-Caution All-Wise	*Volundarkviða* 4, 15, prose
Hildr	Battle	*Voluspá* 30; *Grímnismál* 36; *Darraðarljóð* 3; *Heiti valkyrja; Ásynja heiti; Háttatal* 49, 54; Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni (c. 900), *Haustlong* 1; Hásteinn Hrómundarson halta (before 955), *lausavísur* 5; Þórarinn svarti (983-4), *Máhlíðingavísur* 8; Hávarðr halti ísfirðingr (1002-3), *lausavísur* 3 [var.]; Grímr Droplaugarson (1005), *lausavísur* 3, 4; Ólafr Haraldsson inn helgi (1010), *lausavísur* 3; Haldórr ókristni (c.1010), *Eiríksfløkkr* 1; Grettir Ásmundarson (1028), *lausavísur* 9; Þjóðólfr Arnórsson (c. 1065), *Sexstefja* 2; Gísli Þórgautsson (11th C), *lausavísur*; Hallvarðr háreksblesi (11th C), *Knútsdrápa* 3; Gullosu-Þórðr (c. 1110), *Víðkunnsdrápa*; Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinsson (c.1145), *Háttalykill* 34b; Einarr Skúlason (1153), *Geisli* 70; Einarr Skúlason (c. 1155), *Runhenda* 7; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), Unprovenanced poems 4; *Krákumál* (12th C), 13, 14, 21; *Plácítúsdrápa* (12th C), 19; Ólafr Leggsson (c. 1230), *lausavísur*; Guðmundr Oddsson (1232), *lausavísur* 7; Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld (1240), *Hrynhent* poem 8, 10, 11; Sturla Þórðarson (1242), *lausavísur* 1; Ingjaldr Geirmundarson (1244), *Atloguflokkr* 4; Skáld-Hallr (1246), *Brandsdrápa* 5; Arngrímr ábóti (1345), *Guðmundar kvæði byskups* 43; *Kátrinar drápa* (14th C), 43
Hjalmþrimul	Helmet-Clatter	*Heiti valkyrj*
Hjorþrimul	Sword-Noise	*Darraðarljóð* 3; *Heiti valkyrja*
Hlaðguðr svanhvit	Battle-Weaver Swanwhite	*Volundarkviða* 2, 15, prose
Hljóð	Howling	*Volsungasaga* 1
Hlokk	Chain, Noise, Battle	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 5, 50, 57, 64; Kormákr Ogmundarson (c. 955-70), *lausavísur* 63; Einarr Helgason skálaglamm (c. 986), *Vellekla* 8, 16; Holmgongu-Bersi Véleifsson (late 10th C) *lausavísur* 6; Hallfrøðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld (late 10th C), *lausavísur* 14; Grettir Ásmundarson (1028), *lausavísur* 9; Gizurr gullbrárskald (before 1030), Fragmentary poem; Haraldr Sigurðarson (1066), *lausavísur* 19; Arnórr órðarson jarlaskáld (11th C), *Hrynhenda, Magnússdrápa* 14; Gísli Þórgautsson (11th C), *lausavísa*; *Plácítúsdrápa* (12th C), 21; *Krákumál* (12th C), 13; Gamli

		kanóki (12th C), *Harmsól* 14; Haukr Valdísarson (12th C), *Íslendingadrápa* 24; Gunnlaugr Leifsson (before 1218), *Merlínúspá I*: 34
Hrist	Shaker	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 59, 61; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *lausavísur* 13; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *Sigurðardrápa* 5; Einarr Gilsson (14th C), *Drápa* on Guðmundr Arason 34
Hrund	Pricker, Pusher	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 61; Kormák Ogmundarson (c. 955-70), *lausavísur* 19; Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskáld (1015-16), *lausavísur* 1; Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinsson (c.1145), *Háttalykill* 36b; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *lausavísur* 13; Einarr Skúlason (12th C), *Øxarflokkr* 11
Ilmr [Íma?]	Scent? [Battle]	Hrómundr halti (c. 955), *lausavísur* 2
Kára	Storm, Curl?	*Helgakvíða Hundingsbana II*: prose
Mist	Cloud, Mist	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 61, 62, 85; Tindr Hallkelsson (c. 987), *Drápa* on Hákon jarl 7; Gamli kanóki (12th C), *Harmsól* 2, 5, 61; Ingjaldr Geirmundarson (1244), *Atloguflokkr* 2; Páll Þorsteinsson (1254), *lausavísa*
Nipt	Sister	*Ásynja heiti*
Ráðgríðr	Counsel-Trace, Bossy?	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36
Randgníðr	Shield-Scraper	*Heiti valkyrja*
Randgríðr	Shield-Truce, Shield-Destroyer, Shield-Violence?	*Grímnismál* 36; *Orrostu heiti*
Reginleifr	Power-Trace, Gods-Daughter	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36
Róta	Disorder, Sleet	*Gylfaginning* 36
Sanngríðr	Very Violent, Very Cruel	*Darraðarljóð* 3

Sigrdrífa	Victory-Urger	*Sigrdrífomál* prose; *Fáfnismál* 44
Sigrloð[r]	Victory-Inviter, Victory-Hostess, [Victory-Froth?]	Anonymous verse on the Battle of Ølygstad, 1238 (Skjaldedigtning B II: 154: 34)
Sigrún	Victory-Rune	*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*: 30, 54 & *II*: 14, 25, 29, 42, 45, prose
Skalmold	Sword-Time	*Heiti valkyrja*
Skegg[j]old	Axe-Age	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36
Skuld	Must-Be, Blame, Debt?	*Voluspá* 30; *Heiti valkyrja*; *Ásynja heiti*
Skogul	Shaker, Battle, High-Towering?	*Voluspá* 30; *Grímnismál* 36; *Heiti valkyrja*; *Ásynja heiti*; *Háttatal* 54, 64; Þórbjorn hornklofi (c. 900), *Glymdrápa* 5; Eivindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (961), *Hákonarmál* 1, 8, 13; Þórleifr jarlaskáld Rauðfeldarson (c. 986), *Hákonardrápa* 2; Holmgongu-Bersi Véleifsson (late 10th C) *lausavísur* 1; Gizurr gullbrárskald (before 1030), Fragmentary poem; Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinsson (c.1145), *Háttalykill* 34a; Sigmundr ongull (1152), *lausavísur* 1; Hallar-Steinn (12th C), *Rekstefja* 7, 20, 29; *Krákumál* (12th C), 18; Gunnlaugr Leifsson (before 1218), *Merlínúspá* I: 34, 65; Ingjaldr Geirmundarson (1246), *Brandsflokkr* 3
Sváva	Sleep-Maker, Killer	*Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 37, 40f, 43, prose; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II: prose
Sveið	Vibration, Noise	*Heiti valkyrja*
Svipul	Unstable, Changeable	*Darraðarljóð* 3; *Heiti valkyrja*; *Orrostu heiti*
Tanngniðr	Teeth-Grinder	*Heiti valkyrja*
Þrima	Fight	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Orrostu heiti*
Þrúðr	Power, Treader	*Heiti valkyrja*; *Grímnismál* 36; Þórarinn svarti (983-4), *Máhlíðingavísur* 7

Þogn	Silence	*Heiti valkyrja*
Valþogn	Hostess of the Slain	Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson (c. 986), *lausavísur* 8; Goþþormr sindri (mid-10th C), *Hákonardrápa* 6
Olrún	Ale-Rune	*Volundarkviða* 4, 15, prose

* Alu is the name of a rune found several times in Old Norse poetry, with connotations of ale in a sorcerous context, particularly connected with the ecstasy of inebriation (see discussion in Simek 1993: 11f) The implications of these names are important, as they suggest that the *valkyrjur* were in some sense embodiments of Óðinn's powers, representing the same skills as Snorri lists in *Ynglingasaga*. We recognise them again here – clouding the mind, inducing confusion, freezing the limbs.

We also find a suggestive link to the *gandr* rituals, the *volur* and *seiðr* in another *valkyrja*-name, Gondul. This is the same word used for the staff discussed in chapter three, but its meaning is linked to the nature of the *gandir* spirits reviewed in chapter 5. We can interpret this through its kenning meaning of 'wolf', one of the animals of the battlefield and therefore an appropriate name for a *valkyrja*. Here again we have a battle-name, but one with explicit overtones of sorcery and indeed shamanism, through its associations with combative helping spirits. It may be in relation to this particular *valkyrja* that Óðinn is called Gondlir, of which one reading could be 'controller of the *valkyrja* Gondul' (Tolley 1995a: 69). Even more than most *valkyrjur*, she may therefore have been one of the god's personal spirit helpers and protective battle beings.

Þrúðr is also an interesting name, because despite its relatively neutral meaning – 'Power' – by the Middle Ages proper it had taken on connotations of witchcraft, sorcery, and especially nightmares (Simek 1993: 329). This latter meaning was taken up by Kluge in his dictionary (1989), and he suggested that the name actually derives from *troða*, 'to tread', which would fit this interpretation exactly. Perhaps here we find yet another *valkyrja*-function, and another link between the *valkyrjur* and other supernatural beings, adding the *mara* alongside the *dísir* and *nornir*.

Skuld is the name of one of the *nornir*, whom as we have seen are sometimes confused with the *valkyrjur*. It is probably no coincidence that Skuld is also the name of the witch-queen in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, whose undead armies and spell-barrage finally overwhelm Hrólfr and his champions at the climax of the tale.

Other names are harder to interpret. Does Olrún (‘Ale-Rune’) have something to do with ecstasy? And what is meant by Nipt (‘Sister’) or Reginleifr (‘Power-Trace’)?

The valkyrjur in battle-kennings

The list of named *valkyrjur* given above includes their usage as synonyms in the *heiti*, but one of the most dramatic contemporary demonstrations of them in context is their employment in the battle-kennings of the skalds. These are listed by Meissner (1921), but catalogued and indexed in a manner which makes primary reference to the meaning of the kenning rather than to its individual components (for example, it is easy to locate all the kennings for 'sword', but very difficult to find all the kennings for other things which incorporate words for sword). Isolating those kennings which incorporate *valkyrja* names has therefore been a laborious task, and I do not claim that the references in my *valkyrja*-list above are exhaustive.

In particular, I have deliberately omitted kennings which use *valkyrja* names as cognates for 'man' (especially in the sense of 'warrior') and 'woman'. These are firstly very numerous (see Meissner 1921: 243–350 & 395–421 for general man/woman kennings, and especially his pp. 273, 309, 405–8 for *valkyrjur*). More importantly they do not relate to the specifics of combat which are my purpose in analysing the kennings here. For similar reasons I have not included the very small number of kennings which refer to *valkyrjur* in a violent context unconnected with warfare (such as the presence of Hrund and Hrist in sea-kennings that stress the turbulence of the waves, as in Einarr Skúlason's *lausavísur* 13).

By examining the precise contexts and connotations of the *valkyrja* battle-kennings, and especially through relating these both to individual *valkyrjur* and the date of the skaldic poems, it may be possible to throw some light on how these beings were perceived during the late Viking Age and the following centuries.

The battle-kenning associations of the *valkyrjur* with storms and loud noise form probably the most common theme. Meissner (1921: 181, 183) lists 32 of these battle-kennings relating to bad weather, with another four that do not mention *valkyrjur* by name but instead through additional kennings. The named *valkyrjur* include Gondul (9 examples), Hildr (7), Gunnr (4), Hlokk (3), Mist (3), Hrist (3), Skogul (2) and Hrund (1). The imagery used includes reference to battle as the *valkyrjur*'s showers, hail, rain, frost, gales, blasts of wind, storm and tempest. There are 15 *valkyrja*-kennings in the skaldic corpus that refer to battle by association with noise (Meissner 1921: 189, plus one

from his section on ravens [another kenning comes from Eddic poetry and is thus not considered here] – see below). The named *valkyrjur* include Gunnr (6 examples), Gondul (2), Hildr (2), Skogul (2) and one each for Hrund, Ilmr [Íma?] and Valþogn.

As examples we may look at verse 5 of Þórbjorn hornklofi's *Glymdrápa* from *c.*900, describing battle as *dyn Skoglar*, 'Skogul's din'. Around 1030 Gizurr gullbrárskald portrayed battle as *gogl Skoglar*, 'Skogul's storm' (Skjaldedigtning B I: 192), while a verse attributed to Ragnarr loðbrók in *Háttatal* 54 has it as *Skoglar veðri*, 'Skogul's wind'. In *Háttatal* 59, combat is referred to as *Hristar hreggold*, 'Hrist's storm-time', while five verses earlier we read of *Hildar hlemmidrífu*, 'Hildr's resounding storm' which Faulkes glosses as 'rain of weapons'. The same image is probably implied in *Háttatal* 62, when battle is *Mistar regni* ('Mist's rain). In the twelfth-century we find *glymvindi… Gondla[r]*, 'Gondul's crashing wind' (Einarr Skúlason's unprovenanced verses, Skjaldedigtning B I: 452).

The storm images tend to be rendered banal by the paucity of English words that can be used to translate them, submerging the variety and inventiveness of the Old Norse. The assignment of terms like 'gale', 'tempest' and so on has an unfortunately arbitrary quality that again does little justice to the original. We can also note that beyond the *valkyrja*kennings the range of storm images for battle is truly immense in the skaldic poetry (see Meissner 1921: 176–83 for literally hundreds of examples). Much the same problem arises with the kenning evocations of the noise of battle, but the use of both metaphors does serve to emphasise two important aspects of early medieval warfare that it is easy to overlook today. The kennings are of course constructions of poetic finesse, but we should remember that the skaldic verses were declaimed to audiences that included people for whom battle was a well-known reality, not a literary abstraction. The *valkyrja*-kennings tell us that to such men the experience of combat was dominated by an impression of tempestual, chaotic force and an overwhelming crescendo of sound – it is not hard to imagine that they felt the wings of Óðinn's demons swooping about them in the melée.

Other *valkyrja*-kennings relating to the experience of battle are more direct, such as a small group that describe it in terms of actual attacks by these female beings. In Goþþormr sindri's tenth-century *Hákonardrápa* (8), battle is

described as *geirvífa snerra*, ‘Geirvífa’s onslaught’, and the same term is used of Hlokk in a twelfth-century anonymous verse (Skjaldedigtning B I: 599). On the same pattern, around 1025 Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskáld describes battle as *Gunnar svipr*, ‘Gunnr’s whip’ (*Þórgeirsdrápa* 6).

If the latter image suggests the *valkyrjur* urging on the combatants to greater effort, a milder version of this can be seen in another group of kennings which depict battle as something ordained by them. Focusing on words for meetings and counsel sessions (*mót*, *þing*, *þingmót*, *dómr*, etc), these terms portray fighting as a gathering of men brought together in confrontation, with a sense of irony in that the domestic use of these terms implies peaceful settlement as opposed to the killing that the *valkyrjur* inspire. A typical example comes from Hásteinn Hrómundarson halta’s mid-tenth-century *lausavísur* (2), in which battle is called *Gunnþing*, ‘Gunnr’s *þing*’. Seven of these are known (Meissner 1921: 196), though other kennings exist which employ the same imagery without implicating the *valkyrjur*. The named individuals are Gunnr (3 examples), Gondul (2) and a single mention apiece for Hlokk and Mist.

The *valkyrjur*’s delight in carnage is reflected in kennings that depict battle as their ‘play’. Eight of these are known (Meissner 1921: 199), of which a full seven relate to Hildr, and one to Hrund. Another dimension of this links them to beasts of battle, who continue the sequence by revelling in the aftermath of what the *valkyrjur* enjoy creating. It is interesting that the *valkyrjur* are rarely found in the skaldic rider-kennings for wolves, which instead always depict these animals as the mounts of female trolls and sorceresses (though see the runic material below). However, the *valkyrjur* in *Volundarkviða* live in Úlfdal, ‘Wolf-Dale’, and dwell beside Úlfsiár, ‘Wolf-Lake’, which does provide associations with these beasts of battle. In the kennings, the *valkyrjur* instead predominate among those for ravens, of which Meissner (1921: 121) lists 23 with *valkyrja*-names. There are two more in which he reads what is usually now interpreted as *gogl* (‘storm’) as *gagl* (‘small bird’, ‘gosling’). Another four raven-kennings do not mention *valkyrja*-names, but instead incorporate other kennings for the *valkyrjur* as a type. The named *valkyrjur* are Gunnr (16 examples), Gondul (1), Hildr (2), Hlokk (3) and Mist (1). Perhaps Gunnr, one of the early type of battle-women in *Darraðarljóð*, became especially associated with flight?

The *valkyrjur* were also employed in images of weaponry. Hrund and Hlokk appear in two axe-kennings, both of them from the twelfth century and later (Meissner 1921: 148). They were a much more popular element in sword-kennings, of which 37 *valkyrja* forms are known (*ibid*: 158). Nine *valkyrjur* are named there, including Gunnr (8 examples), Hildr (7), Hlokk (7), Mist (5), and Skogul (4), together with one mention each for Gondul, Hrist, Hrund and Valþogn. The swords are imagined as flames, glowing embers, ice and frost in the hands of the *valkyrjur*, all images relating to the flashing light from a moving blade: for example, Gunnr appears in a sword-kenning by the tenth-century poet Holmgongu-Bersi Véleifsson, *hyrrunnum…Gunnar*, 'bushes [warriors] of Gunnr's fire [sword]' (*lausavísur* 6), and in *Háttatal* 61 a warrior's sword is *frost Mistar* ('Mist's frost'). In *Háttatal* 85 they are *Mistar lauka* ('Mist's leeks'), which brings to mind the sexual overtones of this vegetable as we have seen in *Volsa þáttr*, yet another example where this is combined with combat.

Similar patterns are seen in *valkyrja*-kennings for armour. Nine are known for mail-coats (Meissner 1921: 165). These name Skogul (3 examples), Hildr (3), and one mention each of Gunnr, Gondul and Geir-Róta; the latter is the only mention of this *valkyrja*, who may be a version of the Róta from *Gylfaginning* 36. Meissner includes a kenning that names Rindr, but I know of no source which places her among the *valkyrjur* rather than the giantesses. The mail is almost always seen as an item of clothing, as if it represents the everyday attire of the *valkyrjur* (*e.g. Skoglar serks*, 'Skogul's shirt' in *Háttatal* 64).

The shield-kennings are also very numerous. Meissner (1921: 172) lists some 49 that include *valkyrja*-names. These are divided between Hildr (15 examples), Gunnr (14), Gondul (7), Skogul (6), Hlokk (5), and one each with Hrund and Þrúðr. Five other shield-kennings allude to *valkyrjur* without naming them. The imagery is very varied, and the shields are described primarily in terms of shelter or enclosure as the *valkyrjur*'s fences, gates, walls, tents, ground, yards. Other kennings allude to the shields' slightly bowed and circular shape, as the *valkyrjur*'s moons, clouds, sails, boards, wheels, drums, and so on. The kenning *Hildar vett* from Þjóðólfr's *Haustlong* (1), is especially interesting here, as it firstly portrays the *valkyrja* using the same instrument or tool that the *volur* employed for sorcery (see chapter 3),

and secondly it does so in the context of a metaphor for defensive combat. Some are more dramatic still, such as the shield as Hildr's 'resounding wheel' (verse 2 of Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*) which perhaps also carries drum-like associations.

Some poets had their favourite *valkyrjur* and themes, while sometimes the same *valkyrja* could be viewed in very widely diverging ways. We see this with Hlokk, for example, in a sense of battle (*skúrum Hlakkar*, 'Hlokk's showers', *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* 74–5), shields (*Hlakkar tjalda*, 'Hlokk's curtains', Grettir Ásmundarsson, *lausavísur* 9; *Hlakkar segli*, 'Hlokk's sails', Einarr Helgason skálaglamm. *Vellekla* 8) and swords (*Hlakkar eldar*, 'Hlokk's flames', *Háttatal* 57; *glóð Hlakkar*, 'Hlokk's glowing embers', *Háttatal* 50). There are also a number of raven-kennings, such as *hamdøkkum Hlakkar hauk*, 'Hlokk's dark-coated hawk' in *Háttatal* 5, and *svan Hlakkar*, 'Hlokk's swan' in a fragmentary poem by the early eleventh-century Icelander Gizurr gullbrárskald (Skjladedigtning B I: 192).

Occasionally named *valkyrjur* are referred to indirectly, as in *Háttatal* 49 which contains a number of allusions to Hildr, employing her familial ties instead of her name (*e.g.* 'Hogni's daughter'). Sometimes one *valkyrja*-name is employed as part of a kenning to represent another, as in the verse accompaniment to the description of the battle of Hjaðningavíg in *Skáldskapamál* 50. We have already seen how Snorri's prose account focuses on Hildr's re-animation of the previous day's dead, and in verse 9 from Bragi's mid-ninth-century *Ragnarsdrápa* she is described as *bæti-Þrúðr…dreyruga benja*, 'bloody-wound-curing-Þrúðr'.

In Table 6.2 we see all the battle-kennings with *valkyrja*-names plotted by subject and date (the anonymous verses omitted from the name-lists above have been included here, as have the kennings referring to un-named *valkyrjur*). A further dimension is added in Table 6.3 by making the same chronological associations for the named *valkyrjur* in the kennings. To these we may then add the correlations between named *valkyrjur* and specific kennings (Table 6.4).

We also find *valkyrja*-kennings on actual monuments from the Viking Age, including one mentioning the same Þrúðr, on the Karlevi stone (Öl 1; Fig. 6.3) set up on Öland around the year 1000. The runic inscription, which is the only one bearing a complete stanza in *dróttkvætt*, includes the phrase *dólga Þrúðar*

draugr, which is difficult to translate but means something like ‘executor of battle-Þrúðr’ and referring to a warrior who carries out her wishes. S. B. F. Jansson (1987: 134ff) interprets Þrúðr to refer to the goddess named in *Skáldskapamál* and elsewhere as a daughter of Þórr, but it could equally – and, I think, more likely in this context – refer to the *valkyrja* of the same name. Another example comes from the ninth-century runestone from Rök (Ög 136). Here the ‘horse of Gunnr’ appears as a kenning for ‘wolf’, referring to a beast of battle seeing its food on the field ‘where twenty kings lie’.

Table 6.2 Battle-kennings incorporating valkyrja*-names plotted by connotation and date.*

Kenning (with context)	*Date of kenning*					
	890s	*900s*	*1000s*	*1100s*	*1200s*	*1300s*
Battle (Storm)		9	4	5	14	4
Battle (Noise)	1	5	5	2	1	1
Battle (Attack)		1	1	1		
Battle (Meeting)		4	1	1		1
Battle (Play)		2	1	3	2	
Raven	1	5	9	7	5	
Axe				1	1	
Sword		6	7	11	12	1
Shield	1	13	7	16	17	
Mail-Coat		3	1	1	3	1

Table 6.3 Named valkyjur *appearing in battle-kennings plotted by date.*

Valkyrjur	*Date of appearence in kenning*					
	890s	*900s*	*1000s*	*1100s*	*1200s*	*1300s*
Geir-Róta		1				
Geirvífa		1				
Gunnr	2	12	14	11	7	
Gǫndul		7	3	8	5	
Hildr	1	2	9	9	8	2
Hlǫkk		5	5	3	1	
Hrist				2		1
Hrund		1	1	3		
Ilmr		1				
Mist		1		3	2	
Skǫgul	1	5	1	6	3	
Þrúðr		1				
Valþǫgn		2				



Fig. 6.3 The Karlevi runestone (Öl 1) from the island of Öland, bearing one of the few inscriptions to mention a valkyrie's name. Here, a warrior is described as carrying out the wishes of battle-Þrúðr [Battle-Power], and thus performing his violent duties as expected (photo by Jochka, Creative Commons).

Table 6.4 Correlations between named valkyrjur *and their connotations in battle-kennings.*

Valkyrjur	*Meaning of kenning*									
	Battle (Storm)	*Battle (Noise)*	*Battle (Attack)*	*Battle (Meeting)*	*Battle (Play)*	*Raven*	*Axe*	*Sword*	*Shield*	*Mail-Coat*
Geir-Róta										1
Geirvífa			1							
Gunnr	4	6	1	3		16		8	14	1
Gǫndul	9	2		2		1		1	7	1
Hildr	7	2			7	2		7	15	3
Hlǫkk	3		1	1		3	1	7	5	
Hrist	3							1		
Hrund	1	1			1		1	1	1	
Ilmr		1								
Mist	3			1		1		5		
Skǫgul	2	2						4	6	3
Þrúðr									1	
Valþǫgn		1						1		

Note: in this last table it will be seen that some of the *valkyrjur* are listed with a higher number of appearances than is shown on the *valkyrja*-chronology table (e.g. Hlǫkk is shown above as being associated with a total of 21 kennings, but is listed as making only 14 appearances between the ninth to fourteenth centuries). This is accounted for by the same *valkyrja* appearing more than once in the same poem, but used each time in a different kenning. The fact that a single poet chose to repeatedly employ a particular *valkyrja* should not be allowed to unbalance the overall pattern of representativity over time; by contrast, the context in which that *valkyrja* was imagined needs to be explored in full. Similarly, the total number of entries given above for the different types of kenning is lower than that given in the kenning-chronology table. This is accounted for by the fact that the chronological table includes kennings associated with un-named *valkyrjur*, and these obviously do not appear in the table above.

In contrast to the idealised beauties found in the later Eddic poems, at least one scholar (Damico 1990: 181) has claimed that the *valkyrjur* of the kennings have been "neutralised from characters of volition to elements of heroic machinery". I feel that this is to miss the point, because the latter would seem to have been their function from the earliest period of their 'battle-demon' incarnations. These beings *were* war machines – a modern term that fits them perfectly – and we know that the heroic perception of combat was a staple of Scandinavian military ideology for centuries before the Viking Age. The *valkyrjur* seem to have been not so much characters of volition as specialised personalities, and it is surely their Romantic archetype as 'shield-maiden' that is the later addition.

The variety of their functions paralleled the variety of skilled specialists among their human sorcerer counterparts, but in neither case should this blind us to the fact that both *valkyrjur* and magic-workers can be categorised. It is in this light that aspects of the *skaldmeyjar* tradition can be seen as deriving from earlier patterns, principally through an original emphasis on a sexual relationship to warriors being expressed later as romantic attachment.

Is it possible that from the beginning the *valkyrjur* were essentially personified attributes of Óðinn? Just as the ravens Huginn and Muninn seem to have been aspects of the god's mind that he sent out to obtain information,

perhaps these battle demons represented something similar for his other skills. If Óðinn wished to cause a man to freeze in battle, which we know was among his skills, perhaps he sent Herfjotur the ‘War-Fetter’ to effect his will. If not actually part of himself, the *valkyrjur* may instead have been special spirits summoned and unleashed for specific purposes, just as we have seen in Siberia. The combinations of the *valkyrjur*’s names, abilities and kenning associations strongly suggest some such aspect of their nature.

Before we leave the *valkyrjur* to look at other kinds of supernatural agency in battle, we can note that the term is also known from Anglo-Saxon texts, where it appears as *wælcyrge* and variants thereof (see Damico 1990 for an extensive analysis of *valkyrjur* in Old English sources, with particular reference to *Beowulf*). It is found a number of times in the vocabularies and word lists, some from as early as the 700s, where it is glossed with the names of the Furies – Tisiphone, Allecto and Eurynes. The latter is a version of one of their collective names, and also a personal name. *Wælcyrge* is also glossed with Bellona, the goddess of war, and with a reference to the Gorgons (Wright 1884). At this date and in a non-Nordic context, it is striking that the nature of the *valkyrjur* was clearly understood through reference to female beings of fate and destruction from the Classical world. Even here, however, the Anglo-Saxon sources retain imagery which is otherwise unknown from English (and Mediterranean) culture and seems distinctly Nordic in tone. For example, the ‘Gorgons’ described in *Narratiunculae Anglice conscriptae* (34: 6) have eight legs – like Sleipnir? – and *wælcyrigean eagan*, ‘the eyes of the valkyrie’. The latter seems related to the piercing, aggressive stare characteristic of kings and princes in Norse poetic convention (cf. Marold 1998). The presence of *valkyrja*-like female beings in Saxon battle-charms is taken up further below.

By the late Saxon period, the term had been subsumed into a popular meaning of mortal witches or sorceresses in general, as in Archbishop Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (l. 171) from the early eleventh century, where it occurs in a list of various evils claimed to be afflicting the land. A similar term appears in the poem *Exodus* (l. 164) but it clearly refers there to a raven or some other carrion bird.

The Anglo-Saxon sources also shed a little light on the oblique reference to Freyja’s *valkyrja*-like functions in *Grímnismál* 14, which describes her ‘choosing the slain’. In one version of Aldhelm’s *De laudibus virginitatis*

(4449) we find *wælcyrie* glossed as *veneris*. To my knowledge this is the only explicit link between the *valkyrjur* and the goddess of love and sexuality, but in view of the other Saxon glosses and their closeness to Norse understandings of these beings, this makes an interesting case for such a connection going beyond a mere functional resemblance. We have already seen the associations between Óðinn and Freyja in the *seiðr* complex, and on the battlefield, so some 'sharing' of the *valkyrjur* should not really surprise us.

Supernatural agency in battle

Besides the *valkyrjur*, others of the female beings that we have encountered could also take on an explicitly violent function.

In the *'Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls'* section of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, for example, the *dísir* carry out a similar night-time attack on a hall as is prosecuted through *seiðr* in *Laxdæla saga* (35), with the same result of a boy's death.

A similar phenomenon could also be associated with the *fylgjur*, as we have seen. A good example of this comes from *Njáls saga* (12), in the fight between Þjóstólfr and the friends of Þorvaldr, a man that he has slain. Þjóstólfr has taken refuge with some kinsmen far from the scene of the crime, when news of the killing reaches the dead man's friends. One of their number, a certain Ósvífr, surmises where the fugitives have gone and declares his intention to be revenged. At that moment, far away, one of Þjóstólfr's allies begins to yawn uncontrollably, and declares, *nú sækja at fylgjur Ósvífrs*, 'now Ósvífr's *fylgjur* are attacking us'. In response, the yawning man goes outside, whirls a goat-skin around his head and begins to chant:

Verði þoka	Let there be fog
ok verði skrípi	and let there be monsters
ok undr ollum þeim,	and all these wonders,
er eptir þér sœkja	to hinder your seekers

Njáls saga (12); my translation Ósvífr and his men suddenly find themselves engulfed first in a rolling fog bank and then by a sudden darkness, blinding them and causing them to drop their weapons. Ósvífr declares his intention to quit his attack if he can find his horse and weapons, whereupon the strange weather ceases. However, when he nevertheless resumes his ride towards

Þjóstólfr, the same thing occurs again, until he is forced to break off the attack and return home. Later on, the two sides are reconciled through a legal compensation. We should note that the two men who thus duel with sorcery are not depicted as sorcerers proper, merely as warriors with additional gifts. The terminology of magic is also noticeably avoided.

A similar episode appears in *Sturlunga saga*, when Sturla Sighvatsson is warned by a woman to leave his farm quickly because men are approaching to attack him there. She says that her premonition was caused by the *úfriðarfylgjur* of the men, which she can feel approaching. This is a curious term and hard to translate – *úfrið* means literally 'unpeace', and so these beings could perhaps best be described as '*fylgjur* of disquiet' (cf. Strömbäck 1989: 22f).

Beings of destruction

Beyond the specific categories of supernatural entities that intervened in combat, the Old Icelandic sources also mention a number of other beings whose agency was sometimes believed to have been felt on the battlefield. In the sagas such creatures are often included in the generic labels *troll*, *flagð*, and so on, used for any unspecified malevolent being of supernatural character. Sometimes different terms are employed to describe the same individual. In modern English, the word 'monster' in its vaguest meaning probably comes closest to the sense in which these terms were used in the period of the sagas' composition, and it is probably unwise to fasten too much upon the exact selection of the individual labels attached to these beings.

The perfect illustration of the kind of agency that I describe in this chapter is the intervention at the Battle of Hjorungavágr in 986 by the enigmatic being called Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr. *Jómsvíkinga saga* (73) relates how Jarl Hákon, seeking aid to fight the Jómsvíking fleet that is coming against him, retires to an island and, facing northwards, prays to Þorgerðr who is described as his *fulltrua*, meaning something like 'patron deity' or someone in whom one places confidence. She is angered by his entreaties and rejects his successive attempts at sacrifices, even refusing a human offering. At last Hákon offers the life of his seven-year-old son, which Þorgerðr accepts; on Hákon's orders, the boy is killed by a slave. As the jarl returns to his ships he urges his men to fight more strongly, because he has *heítit til sigrs oss a þ?r baðar systr Þorgerði ok*

Irpu, ‘invoked for our victory both the sisters Þorgerðr and Irpa’. The description of Þorgerðr’s actions in the battle (echoed in Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson’s *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, composed prior to 1222) is worth quoting at length, as it contains a number of crucial elements for our understanding of supernatural agency in combat and how it was perceived both in the Viking Age and in the Middle Ages of the sagas’ composition:

Nu geingr Iarl a skip sitt. ok buaz um af ny io. ok siðan greiða þeir atróðrinn. ok tekz þar nu af nyio enn grimmazti bardagi. ok þui næst te kr ueðrit at þyckna inorðr ok dregr yfir skiótt. liðr ok a daginn. þui næst flugu elldingar ok reíðar. ok þui næst gorir a él mikit þeir Iomsuikingar attu at uega igegn ueðrinu. þetta el var með sua micklum bysnum at menn mattu uarla standaz. Enn menn hofðu aðr farit af klęðu num fyrir hita sakir enn nu tók at kólna. sękia þo bardagann frýio laúst. ok þo at þeir Iomsuíkingar kastaði grioti eða vápnum eðaskyti spiótum. þa bar ueðrit þat aptr a þa allt ok þar með vápna gangr sinna ouina Hauarðr haugguanndi sa fyrstr Haulga brúði iliði Hákonar Iarls. ok margir sa ofreskir menn. ok þa er líttað linaði elino. sa þeir at aur fló af huerium fingri flagðino ok varð maðr fyrir huerri ok segia þeir Sigvalldas. ok hann mællti. Eigi þicki mer þa sem ver berimz við menn eina enn þo ere nauðsyn at huerr dugi sem má þa er nockut linaði elino heitr Hakon Iarl iannat sinn á Þorgeirði ok quez nu hafa mikit til unit. Nu tekr i annat sinn at rauckua at elino ok er nu mycklo meíra ok harðara enn fyr ok þegar i aunndverðu élino þa ser Havarðr hogguanndi at.ij. konur erukomnar a skipIarls ok hafa eítt atferli. Sigvalldi mællti þa. Nu uil ek brutt flýia ok gori sua allir minir menn. Ecki streingðu ver þess heít at beriaz við traull er nu ok þui ver ra enn aðan at nu eru. ij. flaugð.

Then the jarl boarded his ship and prepared for the fight, and the fleet rowed to the attack, and again there was the most furious battle. And soon the weather began to thicken in the north and clouds covered the sky, and the daylight waned. Next came flashes of lightning and thunder, and with them a violent shower. The Jómsvíkings had to fight facing into the storm, and the squall was so heavy that they could hardly stand up against it. Men had cast off their clothes, earlier, because of the heat, and now it was cold. Nevertheless, no one needed to be urged on to do battle. But although the Jómsvíkings hurled stones and other missiles and threw their spears, the wind turned all their weapons back upon them, to join the shower of missiles from their enemies. Havarðr

Hacker was the first to see Holgabrúðr in the fleet of Jarl Hákon, and then many a second-sighted man saw her. And when the squall abated a little they saw that an arrow flew from every finger of the ogress, and each arrow felled a man. And they told Sigvaldi, and he said, “It seems we are not fighting men alone, but still we should do our best.” And when the storm lessened somewhat Jarl Hákon again invoked Þorgerðr and said that he had done his utmost. And then it grew dark again with a squall, this time even stronger and worse than before. And right at the beginning of the squall Havarðr Hacker saw that two women were standing on the Jarl’s ship, and doing the same things as before. Then Sigvaldi said, “Now I am going to flee, and let all my men do so. I did not vow to fight against trolls, and it is now worse than before, as there are two ogresses.”

Jómsvíkinga saga 73–4; tr. after Hollander 1955: 101–2.

The Jómsvíking fleet breaks up and the battle is won for Hákon. After the fighting, some of his men weigh the hailstones to gauge the power of his patrons, and they are found to weigh an ounce each. Although *Jómsvíkinga saga* is the most detailed account, elements of the same tale are also found in other sources: the blinding hail is mentioned in Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and in *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (32) which also states that it came from the north; both the storm and Hákon’s sacrifice are mentioned by Saxo Grammaticus (10:IV:2–3); the arrows from Þorgerðr’s fingers are mentioned in Þórkell Gíslason’s *Búadrápa* (10).

These are some of the most dramatic images in all of saga literature, and something of an archetype for the praxis of battle magic: a chill darkness blots out the sun as the ships course through showers of rain and hail, lightning flashes as the Jómsvíkings fight into the teeth of the storm; the unnatural wind throws all their missiles back into their faces, while their men fall to arrows flying from the fingers of Hákon’s demons, beings dimly visible through the gale only to those with the ability to see into other realms.

This question of visibility is important. The effects of supernatural intervention are evident to all, but the agents of it are not. It is also significant that Sigvaldi, one of the Jómsvíking commanders, has to be *told* that Þorgerðr is fighting in Hákon’s host – the implication is that he cannot see her himself. Again, the other world from which these beings come is accessible only to a

gifted few. This ability is not necessarily an attribute of high status, simply of ‘second-sighted men’.

What kind of being is Þorgerðr? A number of sources claim that she is a goddess of some kind (the references to Þorgerðr are summarised in McKinnell 2001: 408–12, 2002; see also the extensive discussion in Laidoner 2014: 194–206). Snorri locates her in Hálogaland in Norway, and the idea that she was a divine object of local veneration here is also found in *Færeyinga saga*, the greater saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, *Þorleifs þáttr jarlaskálds*, and *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Storm (1885) considered her to be some kind of family deity linked to Hákon’s clan. In *Njáls saga* (88) her temple is again located in Gudbrandsdal, where her idol, as large as a man, is set up besides images of Þórr and Irpa. This latter figure, mentioned only here and in *Jómsvíkinga saga* 73–5, is said to be Þorgerðr’s ‘sister’ but nothing else is known of her; she is obviously the creature called up as reinforcements after Hákon invokes his patron a second time. The *Njáls saga* description mentions the clothes and gold (arm?)rings of the idols, and the very interesting detail that Þorgerðr’s image is hooded (the phrase used is *fald á hofði*, which implies something that actually encloses the head, cf. *hjálmi faldinn*, ‘wearing a helmet’) – we can compare this with the note on masks in chapter 3. Only one source, *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, locates Þorgerðr’s temple in Iceland, where she is claimed to have issued unwelcome prophecies.

However, besides being mentioned as a goddess, in *Ketils saga h?ings* her name is also found in the lists of *þulur* for trolls and giantesses (*Trollkvenna heiti*, a context discussed by Chadwick in 1950), and it is more likely that she is a being of this kind than that she may be counted among the divine families. This idea is strengthened by the alternative forms of her name: whereas Snorri’s *Edda* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* have her as Holgabrúðr, other sources use the forms Horða-, Horga- and Holða- combined with the suffix *-troll* (Halvorsen 1976a: 383). She also seems to be associated with the north, the direction that Hákon faces to pray to her and the direction from which the storm comes upon the Jómsvíking fleet: this might imply a connection with Jotunheim, the abode of the giants.

There is also a suggestion that Þorgerðr was a being of great sexual power, because her client Hákon was known for his extraordinary promiscuity – a very unusual quality for a nobleman in the Norse sources. In the *Ágrip* (12)

and *Fagrskinna* (22) he is described as sleeping indiscriminately with women all over his realm, including the wives, sisters and daughters of the local chieftains. In Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (45) the jarl's reign is said to have been characterised by good harvests and peace, but his insatiable sexual appetites are also brought up again. This argument is developed at greater length by McKinnell (2001: 411f, also referencing Richard North's work), but there is a strong suggestion that Þorgerðr was some kind of fertility being, who passed on her fecundity to the land via the person of the jarl, who in turn transmitted this in his sexual conquests at every level of society. Once again, we therefore see a connection between sexuality and a powerful supernatural being of destruction.

It is worth emphasising that many of the sources in which Þorgerðr appears are relatively early – Þórkell's *Búadrápa* (twelfth-century), Bjarni's *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (before 1222), Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*c.*1200), and *Jómsvíkinga saga* itself, which in its composition is thought to predate both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. However, none of the skaldic poems contemporary with the battle mention either Þorgerðr or the storm that she is alleged to have caused (Halvorsen 1976a). The number and variety of sources that mention Þorgerðr leave little doubt that she is *not* a medieval invention, but on balance it would seem likely that her divinity is a later addition (cf. de Vries 1957: §562). If the saga writers embellished an oral tradition about some kind of supernatural 'helper' in Hákon's service, then she appears far more likely as a troll or giantess, and not as a goddess. The idea of a temple (*hov*) to her and her sister must be included in the medieval literary motifs built up around her, leaving the participation of malevolent spirits on the Norwegian side at Hjorungavágr as the only element of the story that may have Viking-Age roots.

The later sources do however seem to have preserved intact some of the attributes with which she was associated, and which can be recognised from the wider analysis of battle magic given here and in preceding chapters. For example, there are implications of incest in Snorri's relation that King Holgi was the *father* of Þorgerðr, when her name – Holgabrúðr – clearly states that she was his bride (*Skáldskaparmál* 42). This is yet another link to the complex of sexual overtones and transgression of social boundaries that we have seen repeatedly in connection with the combination of sorcery and battle. Simek

(1993: 327) observes that if her actions on the battlefield are reminiscent of the *valkyrjur*, then her role in the temple as a provider of prophecy brings to mind the *volur*: once again, the same links as we see between *seiðr* and its operatives, battle, and the projection of destruction. Her ability to summon the storm and control the weather are also paralleled by Óðinn's skills.

Other supernatural beings of destruction resemble the *valkyrjur*, but are separate from them. One such appears in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (80–1), in the form of a strange creature that appears in premonitions of disaster dreamt by two men in King Haraldr's fleet as it sails to attack England in 1066. In one case, the man sees a *trollkona mikil*, 'a great troll-woman', holding a sword in one hand and a trough (*trog*) in the other, looking out over the fleet. On every ship's prow sits a bird of carrion, and the troll-woman chants a verse making it clear that the Norwegians' corspes will soon be feeding the ravens. The second man's dream is more specific, and he sees the troll-woman riding on a wolf in front of the English army as it advances to meet the Vikings. A man's bloody corpse hangs from the wolf's jaws, and one by one the troll-woman feeds it with every man who opposes her. All the while she chants a verse reminiscent of the *Darraðarljóð*, describing how the army will feed the wolf and the king will fall.

In *Helgakviða Hiorvarðssonar* 13–19, the hero Atli talks of his ships coming under attack from *fálor*, 'troll-women', against which the hulls of his vessels have been reinforced with iron plates. He leads the defence against them himself: *Úrgan stafn ek hefi opt búit/ok kvalðar kveldriðor!*, 'I've often stayed at the dew-washed prow/ and tormented night-riders!' (ibid: 15). In strophe 18 another *hála*, 'ogress', is described as blocking a fjord with the intention of sending all the ships' crews to Ran, *i.e.* to sink and drown them.

Such troll-women appear very frequently in the written sources, often as rather conventionalised motifs, but occasionally we find very specific examples which also tie in to the other themes that we have examined here. A being of this kind can be found in the thirteenth-century dream poem in *Stjornu-Oddadraumr*, when a she-troll is described as undergoing a sorcerous transformation in battle. As the creature enters combat, her head suddenly changes into that of a wolf. At the same time she becomes invisible, unless looked at under a warrior's left hand (cf. McKinnell 2001: 403).

There are many other examples of similar beings in the Eddic poems and the sagas, some of them reduced to confused generalisations by the Christian filter of medieval writers. It is in this light that we may see Queen Skuld's preparations for her assault on Hrólfr, when we read that she employs a 'powerful *seiðr*' to summon *álfar ok nornir ok annat útolulegt illþýði, suá at mannlig náttúra má eigi slíkt standaz*, 'elves and norns and countless other vile creatures, a force which no human power could withstand' (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 32). Indeed, there are one or two instances in which such creatures themselves employ *seiðr*, such as the two trolls in *Halfdanar saga Bronufóstra*.

Óðinn and the Wild Hunt

A third major category of supernatural agency in a conflictual context may be traced in the complex of mythological stories concerning the so-called Wild Hunt of Óðinn. There are variations on the precise form of the legends, but they all concern a body of spirits who ride the storms of the midwinter sky during the nights of Yule (in the pagan period broadly definable as lasting from mid-November to early January), terrorising the population and sometimes carrying people away. In all versions of the tale the spirits are associated with the dead, often in the form of ghosts, and more often still they are described as an army or a band of warriors.

In the south and west of Norway, the Hunt was known as the *Oskoreidi*, the original derivation of which has been the subject of some debate (Hægstad 1912). Some have seen it as stemming from an earlier form *óskreið*, 'wish-ride', and thereby connecting with the *valkyrjur* in their aspect as wish-maidens, as discussed above. Others link the name to *Ásguðsreið*, 'ride of the Æsir god [*i.e.* Óðinn]', and the name could equally mean simply 'ride of terror' (de Vries 1957: §167, 309, 335, 401). The southern Swedish and Danish name, *Odensjakt*, contains an obvious link to the god (de Vries 1957: §167), and similar associations are found further south in the Germanic world, where the Hunt was known as *Wuotanes her*, 'Woden's army', and later the *Wildes Heer* or *Wilde Jagd* led by *der Schimmelreiter* (see Huth 1935; de Vries 1963). In fact, these stories are found throughout northern Europe in remarkably similar forms, and even beyond the Germanic cultures we find that legends of ghostly horsemen in the midwinter sky also feature in Celtic mythology (see Ginzburg's survey, 1990: 101f). Some of these traditions continued even into the nineteenth century, with prophetic processions of spirits such as the

‘church porch watch’ in Britain, which identified those who would die in the coming year (Menefee 1989).

The Wild Hunt tales proper are of medieval and later date, and are linked to the role played by Óðinn in folklore long after the period of active belief in the old gods. However, these medieval tales can be traced back to a more general belief in the Viking Age, in which various kinds of supernatural riders could be encountered singly or in groups, and whose appearance was often associated with a premonition of doom, a warning, or as a sign of great events taking place. One of the most graphic examples is Hildiglúmr’s vision in *Njáls saga*:

Hann gekk út dróttinsnótt, þá er tólf vikur váru til vetrar. Hann heyrði brest mikinn, ok þótti honum skjálfa bæði jorð ok himinn. Síðan leit hann í vestrættina, ok þóttisk hann sjá hring ok eldslit á ok í hringinum mann á gram hesti. Han bar skjótt yfir, ok fór hann hart; hann hafði loganda brand í hendi. Hann reið svá nær honum, at hann mátti gorla sjá hann; honum sýndisk hann svartr sem bik ok heyrði, at hann kvað vísu með mikilli raust: Ek ríð
hesti hélugbarða, úrigtoppa,
ills valdanda.
Eldr er í endum, eitr er í miðju; svá er um Flosa ráð sem fari kefli, ok svá er um Flosa ráð sem fari kefli.

Þá þótti honum hann skjóta brandinum austr til fjallanna, ok þótti honum hlaupa upp eldr svá mikill, att hann þóttisk ekki sjá til fjallanna fyrir. Honum sýndisk sjá maðr ríða austr undir eldinn ok hvarf þar. Síðan gekk hann inn ok til rúms síns ok fekk langt óvit ok rétti við ór því. Hann munði allt þat, er fyrir hann hafði borit, ok sagði foður sínum, en hann bað hann segja Hjalta Skeggjasyni; hann fór ok sagði honum. Hjalti mælti: ”Þú hefir sét gandreið, ok er þat ávallt fyrir stórtíðendum”.

He [Hildiglúmr] went out on the Sunday night twelve weeks before winter. He heard a tremendous crash, and it seemed to him that both the earth and the sky shivered. Then he looked out westwards, and he thought he saw a circle of fire, and in the circle was a man on a grey horse. He passed swiftly over, and he was riding hard; he had a burning brand in his hand. He rode so close to him that he could see him clearly; he seemed to him as black as pitch, and he could hear how he spoke a verse with a great roar: I ride a horse frost-battered, ice-topped,
evil-bringing.
Fire at the ends poison in the middle; so it is with Flósi’s state as this firebrand goes, and so it is with Flósi’s state as this firebrand goes.

It seemed to him that he shot the brand east to the mountains, and there seemed to him to spring up a fire so great that he thought he could not see the mountains behind. The man appeared to ride east under the flames and there he disappeared. Then he [Hildiglúmr] went indoors and to his bed, where he fainted and lay unconscious for a long time. When he recovered he could remember every detail of the apparition he had seen, and told his father about it. His father asked him to tell it to Hjalti Skeggjason. He [Hildiglúmr]

went to him and told him. Hjalti said, ‘You have seen the witch-ride [*gandreið*], and that is always a portent of disaster.’

Njáls saga 125
My translation after Orchard 1997: 182–3 and Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson 1960: 260–1

Here we have an example of yet another meaning of a term we have encountered before, because the *gandreið* is of course the ‘riding of *gandir*’. Linking as we have seen both to wolves, helping spirits, and the steeds of female sorcerers, here we see them in the new context of the riders in the night sky. The passage from *Njáls saga* combines two of the main functions of the *gandreið* when met in this sense, in that the vision prophesies not only a man’s doom – in this case that of Flósi Þórðarsson – but also that the prophecy is made *before* the deed which will bring that fate upon him (in this instance, Flósi’s orchestration of the burning of Njál, something perhaps intimated by the horseman’s flaming brand). Typical too is the fact that the warning of momentous events to come is not made in such a way as to enable them to be averted. We may note that the identity of the rider, the pitch-black man, is obscure – he could be a spirit of some kind, or Óðinn himself.

Another example from the same saga is more laconic, but shows the dangers associated with such riders, and their link to battle. Towards the end of the tale, as the Viking forces of Dublin march to their catastrophic defeat at Clontarf, various premonitions of the disaster are felt throughout the North. It is in this context that the *Darraðarljóð* is related, but also a number of other visions:

Sá atburðr varð í Orkneyjum, at Hárekr þóttisk sjá Sigurð jarl ok nokkura menn með honum. Tók Hárekr hest sinn ok reið til móts við jarl, ok sá menn, at þeir fundusk ok riðu undir leiti nokkurt. Sásk þeir aldri síðan, ok engi ørmul fundusk af Háreki.

It so happened that in the Orkneys, Hárekr thought he saw Jarl Sigurðr and some of his men with him. Hárekr took his horse and rode to meet the Jarl, and it was seen that they met up and then rode away behind a hill. They were never seen again, and no trace was found of Hárekr.

Njáls saga 157; my translation

The chieftain that Hárekr thinks he sees riding in the Orkneys has of course already been killed at the battle in Ireland. Here in the thirteenth-century prose we apparently see the riders as the spirits of the violently slain, luring others with them on their journey to the next world.

Some have argued that the riders reflect a general concept of the community of the dead, combined with a belief in midwinter as a time when this was physically closest to the world of the living, and also coinciding with the howling storms of the season (Simek 1993: 373). However, the association with warriors and a military retinue seems also important, and is strikingly similar to the Sámi beliefs connected with the Northern Lights, as discussed in chapter 4.

It is interesting to note that the same theme of armies fighting in the sky was recorded by Ibn Fadlan on his travels in the Volga region, when he describes a heavenly phenomenon that was probably the Aurora Borealis (*Risala* 49; Lund Warmind 1995: 132).

For the Viking Age itself, the meaning and origin of these spirit-warriors riding in the sky was further explored by Otto Höfler in his 1934 thesis, who argued that the hunt was a memory of the secret military brotherhoods that take up the bulk of this work. The associations of heavenly warriors with Óðinn's chosen slain, the *einherjar*, is obvious here.

The projection of destruction

The concept of projecting misfortune and injury has a rich history among the Norse, as in other northern cultures. A related theme is the idea of magical projectiles (cf. Lid 1958), encompassing a variety of sorcerous darts and weapons sent at an enemy. Sometimes this takes the form of a physical attack by a spirit, either summoned up or sent out as an aspect of the sorcerer's own essence. We have encountered these beings already in chapter 3, with the shapes of sorceresses 'riding' their victims, and in the concept of the *mara*, the Nightmare.

At times we see the direct employment of *seiðr* for these purposes, as in *Ynglingasaga* 13–14 when the *volva* Huld̲r kills two kings through the use of this sorcery. In the first instance, she conjures up something called a *vitta véttr*, a curious term that means approximately 'creature of magic tools' (see Dronke 1997: 132). In many ways this being seems identical to the *mara*, and its

purpose in this instance is to trample King Vanlandi to death. This is the same incident as recorded in strophe 3 of the *Ynglingatal*, quoted in the same chapter. On the second occasion, the same *volva* performs an unspecified *seiðr* ritual which enables King Vísburr's sons to kill him in his hall at night – apparently a spell which brings its victim (and his retainers?) off-guard. The *vitta véttr* reappears in the slaying of yet another king, Aðils, in *Ynglingasaga* 29 (see Sundqvist 2002: 224–9). A similar example from *Eyrbyggja saga* 53 has been cited above in chapter 3, where a shepherd is attacked by the undead spirit of the *seiðr*-worker Þorgunna.

There may have been an element of these beings that was actually the assistant spirit of the performer herself. In chapter 3 we have drawn attention to *Voluspá*'s internal dialogue between a *volva* and her alter-ego, but it is noticeable how this second being first appears in strophe 21 in connection with the struggle between the Æsir and Vanir. It even begins *Þat man hón fólkvíg*, 'She remembers the war', and as the poem relates the violent sorcery of Gullveig and Heiðr it may be that this aspect of the *volva* was especially connected with the projection of destruction. McKinnell has argued that second element of Gullveig's name actually means 'military strength' (2001: 407). The *volva* in the poem also addresses Óðinn by some of his war-names (Valfoðr, Herfoðr, Sigfoður etc), which enhances the connotation here.

Related to these malevolent beings is the widespread idea of sickness personified as a corporeal entity attacking the sufferer. We have observed this above with the 'flying fever demon' of the Hemdrup rune-staff, and find it again in small runic amulets of silver and bronze intended to be worn around the neck for protection. A dramatic object of this kind was found in Viking-Age deposits from central Sigtuna, with a double-sided inscription to ward off a 'wound-fever' which is even given a name, Þurr, and characterised several times as taking wolf-form (Ros 1990: 135f). Other similar amulets are known from the Rus' settlements of Staraja Ladoga and Novgorod, and also from Roskilde in Denmark (Roesdahl & Wilson 1992: 302).

As we have seen in chapters 4 and 5, all these phenomena are entirely in keeping with the beliefs and practices of the circumpolar cultures. The important difference among the early medieval Scandinavians is that these concepts were extended into the sphere of military combat. Some exemplary instances that combine both the external projection of misfortune and its

warlike context are seen very clearly in the pagan Anglo-Saxon charms, written down in the period *c.*950–1050 (collected and edited by Griffiths 1996: 173– 204; see also Jolly 1996: ch. 5 and A. Hall 2007, for a more extensive treatment).

These include a complex spell to protect crops from sorcerous attack (the 'Land Ceremonies Charm', Griffiths 1996: 173–8), and long lists of herbs and other ingredients. A long formula against poison (the 'Nine Herbs Charm', *ibid*: 178–83), repeatedly characterises infection and sickness as something externally projected: *nu magon þas VIIII wyrta wið nygon wuldorgeflogenum*, 'now these nine herbs avail against nine great spirits'. The medicinal herbs will *wreceð heo wraðan*, 'drive away the evil ones', and they will be 'put to flight'. Woden (*i.e.* Óðinn) is also mentioned, *on heofonum…hongode*, 'hanging in heaven', and the god uses *VIIII wuldortanas*, 'nine twigs of glory' against sorcerous hostility. Another charm *Wið Dweorh*, 'Against a Dwarf' (*ibid*: 187ff), ascribes the onslaught of fever to an attack by this being.

The most dramatic and relevant here is probably the charm *Wið Færstice*, 'For a Sudden Stitch' from the end of the tenth century (*ibid*: 189ff). It is worth quoting in full:

Hlude wæran hy, la, hlude, ða hy ofer þone hlæw ridan; wæran anmode, ða hy ofer land ridan.
Scyld ðu ðe nu, þu ðysne nið genesan mote.
Ut, lytel spere, gif her inne sie!
Stod under linde, under leohtum scylde, þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægan beræddon and hy gyllende garas sændan; ic him oðerne eft wille sændan, fleogende flane forane togeanes.
Ut, lytel spere, gif hit her inne sy!

Sæt smið, sloh seax lytel, [...] iserna, wund[rum] swiðe.
Ut, lytel spere, gif her inne sy!
Syx smiðas sætan, wælspera worhtan.
Ut, spere næs in, spere!

Gif her inne sy ise[r]nes dæl, hægtessan geweorc, hit sceal gemyltan.
Gif ðu wære on fell scoten oððe wære on flæsc scoten oððe wære on blod scoten oððe wære on lið scoten, næfre ne sy ðin lif atæsed; gif hit wære esa

gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan.
Þis ðe to bote esa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes; ic ðin wile helpan.
Fle[oh] þær on fyrgenh[ea]fde!
Hal westu, helpe ðin drihten!

Nim þonne þæt seax, ado on wætan.
Loud were they, lo, loud, when they rode over the burial mound; they were fierce, when they rode over the land.
Shield yourself now [so that] you might survive this evil attack.
Out, little spear, if here [any] be within!
[I] stood beneath a linden [*i.e.* shield], under a light shield, where the mighty women revealed their power, and they, yelling, sent forth spears; I to them another one back will send, a flying arrow straight towards [them].
Out, little spear, if it be here within!

The smith sat, hammered out a little knife, [an article of] iron, very wondrously.
Out, little spear, if [any] here be within!
Six smiths sat, made killing-spears.
Out, little spear, not in, spear!

If there be here within a portion of iron, the work of hags, it shall melt away.
If you were in the skin shot or were in the flesh shot or were in the blood shot or were in a limb shot, never be your life jeopardised; whether it was *Æ*sir's shot or it was elves' shot or it was hags' shot, now I shall help you.
[Let] this [be] a remedy for you for *Æ*sir's shot, this a remedy to you for elves' shot, this a remedy to you for hags' shot; I shall help you.
Flee there to the mountain-head!
May you be healthy, may God assist you!

Then take that knife, put [it] in liquid.

Wið Færstice l. 1–10; text and translation after Griffiths 1996: 189ff

The parallels to the Norse sources are manifold and obvious: the stitch as a weapon (a spear); its onset as an attack; the role of weapons (the cloud of spears, the shield, the knife); the *valkyrjur*-like women who seem to lead the attack; the arcane role of the smith; the idea of counterattack; the explicit mention of the 'shot' as the work of hags (*i.e.* sorceresses or witches), the elves or even of the Æsir themselves (this later pairing is echoed in the formula that heralds Ragnarok in *Voluspá* 49). That the whole charm fits the pattern of 'magical projectiles' is equally clear.

The same features are found in other Anglo-Saxon charms, such as that against *wæterælfadle*, 'the water-elf disease' which is thought to be chicken pox or measles (Griffiths 1996: 193f). The blisters of the disease are 'wounds', and the poultices laid upon the afflcited are *beadowræda*, 'war-bandages'. The mighty women of the charm against stitch occur in another context too, which gives us a startling image of their appearance. In a mid-eleventh-century charm against bee-stings (*ibid*: 195f), the swarm of bees is hailed as *ge sigewif*, 'you war-women': the depiction of a boiling cloud of female battle beings is striking. Amongst other charms dealing with cattle theft, injury to horses, protection on a journey and so on, we find not only the idea of external attack but also a curious and unexplained item of protective equipment – a *sigegyrd*, 'rod of victory' ('Journey Charm'; *ibid*: 201), which will protect the bearer from confusion and nightmares. Is this a dim reflection of the staffs reviewed in chapter 3?

Battle magic

From this individual level of assault we can move to the expression of similar concepts at a larger scale, on the battlefield itself. As we have done in chapter 3 with the 'domestic' functions of *seiðr* and its related Óðinnic rituals, it is also possible to isolate what is effectively a repertoire of war-spells, forming the 'second branch' of Nordic sorcery as discussed above. They can be summarised as follows: instilling fear and confusion conferring courage and clarity of mind instilling physical weakness conferring physical strength magically hindering the body's movements breaking or strengthening weapons and armour providing invulnerability in battle killing people resurrecting dead warriors to fight again providing protection from sorcerers fighting or killing sorcerers These spells and charms appear to have operated at two levels,

concerning respectively warriors and sorcerers. We shall examine them here in turn.

Sorcery for warriors

The ritual dimensions of battle could begin before the commencement of hostilities. One example of this occurs in *Styrbjarnar þáttr Svíakappa*, presenting one of several versions of the Battle of Fyris Plains fought outside Uppsala in the late tenth century between the Swedish king Eiríkr and his kinsman Styrbjorn. King Eiríkr has been a faithful follower of Óðinn, and after making offerings to the god he is approached by a man in a broad-brimmed hat – a classic Óðinn figure. He gives the king a reed (*reysproti*), and tells him to cast it over Styrbjorn's army as it advances, at the same time calling out *Óðinn á yðr alla*, 'you all belong to Óðinn'. As he throws the reed it turns into a spear, Styrbjorn's men are blinded and – somewhat improbably in the environs of Uppsala – a mountain falls on them. This is not merely the dedicatory ritual of Óðinn's spear that we have seen in chapter 3, it is an active war-spell that results in the destruction of an army.

It is also in Óðinn's powers that we see the greatest number of battle spells, set out at length in the *Ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál*. Jens Peter Schjødt's argument (2001: 574ff) that Óðinn cannot simultaneously operate as a shaman-figure and a god of the warrior elite seems puzzling in this light, as the shamanic complex actually provides the perfect meeting-place of these roles. We can examine the different war spells in turn, comparing them with their analogues from other sources.

Firstly we see spells used by Óðinn to dull the edges of his enemies' weapons:

Þat kann ek it þriðja:	This third I know:
ef mér verðr þorf mikil	if I have real need
hapts við mína heiptmogu,	to hold my foes in check,
eggjar ek deyfi	I blunt the blades
minna andskota,	of my adversaries,
bítat þeim vápn né velir.	their weapons and staffs cannot bite.

Hávamál 148;
translation after Page 1995: 213 with my amendments The conferrence of magical invulnerability is also found among Óðinn's skills in *Ynglingasaga* 6, which from its phrasing is almost certainly based on the strophe from

Hávamál. In the same vein, in *Sogubrot af fornkonungum* (374) a ‘great *seiðr*’ is laid upon King Haraldr to ensure that he will not fall in battle and that no iron can bite him.

The idea of fettering is also particularly striking among the war-spells, and is played out in several senses. On the one hand this refers to dexterity, and the idea of either increasing that of one’s own warriors or inducing fatal clumsiness – ‘binding’ the limbs – in one’s enemies. On the other hand it can refer to literal fetters, to freeing prisoners or capturing and immobilising opponents. These notions have already been encountered both in Óðinn’s names (*e.g.* Haptaguð, ’Fetter-God’) and in those of the *valkyrjur* (*e.g.* Herfjotur, ‘War-Fetter’). The catalogue of chants in Hávamál includes one of Óðinn’s spells relating to this:

Þat kann ek it fjórða:
ef mér fyrðar bera
bǫnd at bóglimum,
svá ek gel
at ek ganga má;
sprettr mér af fótum fjǫturr
en af hǫndum hapt.

This fourth I know:
if men put shackles
on my limbs,
my chant will
let me go free;
the fetter springs from my legs
and the bonds from my hands.

Hávamál 149;
translation after Page 1995: 213 with my amendments In comparison, from the Continental Germanic sources we can also consider the First Merseburg Charm (de Vries 1957: §230; Neckel 1913: 83), recorded in a tenth-century manuscript but certainly of older date. This spell in Old High German enlists the aid of supernatural women called Idisi (*dísir*?) to release warriors from their chains and to obstruct an enemy force:

Eiris sâzun idisi,
sâzun hera duoder;
suma hapt heptidun,
suma heri lezidun,
suma clûbôdun
umbi cuoniouuidi:
insprinc haptbandun,
invar vîgandun.

Once the Idisi sat,
sat here and there;
some bound fetters,
some hampered the army,
some untied
fetters:
escape from the fetters,
flee from the enemies.

Text after de Vries 1957: §230; translation after Simek 1993: 171

Whether these bonds are literal or mental is unclear, but there seems little doubt that this charm is related to the ‘war-fetter’ of Viking sorcery. The Idisi have been interpreted as a form of *valkyrjur*, preserved in a Germanic tradition earlier than most of the Norse sources (Kögel 1892), and we can also see obvious links with the Anglo-Saxon charm against stitch discussed above. On the Continent at least these beings, and their *valkyrja*-like function, would seem to be of great antiquity. This is seen, for example, in the name Idisiaviso, ‘Plain of the Idisi’, that Tacitus gives to the battlefield near the Weser where the Roman imperial forces under Germanicus fought Arminius’ Cherusci in AD 16 (*Annales* II: 16). Simek tentatively suggests (1993: 170f) that the name Idisiaviso may correspond to the Norse Iðavollr, the plain on which the gods assemble in the new world that comes into being after Ragnarok – an interesting association for a battlefield.

The magical mastery of the field also extends to active intervention to control the movement of weapons. Here we see another of Óðinn’s chants from *Hávamál*:

Þat kann ek it fimmta:	This fifth I know:
ef ek sé af fári skotinn	if I see shot in enmity
flein í fólki vaða,	an arrow flying in battle,
flýgra hann svá stinnt	it will not speed so surely
at ek stǫðvigak,	that I cannot stop it,
ef ek hann sjónum of sék.	if once I get my eye on it.

Hávamál 150;
translation after Page 1995: 213 with my amendments Spells could also be laid directly on weapons, for example in *Þorsteins saga Víkingassonar* when the sword Angrvaðill is given killing powers through *seiðr*. Similarly, in *Njáls saga* (30) we read that,

Hallgrímr hefir atgeir þann, er hann hefir látit seiða til, at hánum skall ekki vápn at bana verða nema hann; þat fylgir ok, at þegar veit, er víg er vegit með atgeirinum, því at þá syngr í honum áðr hátt; svá hefir hann náttúru mikla með sér.

Hallgrímr carries a heavy spear*, on which he has had *seiðr* worked so that no other weapon can kill him; and furthermore one can tell that the spear will

shortly kill a man by the loud ringing sound that it makes; such is the greatness of its supernatural power.

Njáls saga (30), my translation * *atgeir* is often translated as ‘halberd’, but this medieval weapon was unknown in the Viking Age and in all probability a kind of heavy spear for close fighting is meant

This *seiðr*-spear plays a significant role in the saga after its acquisition by the hero Gunnarr, and its supernatural qualities are mentioned several times (see McTurk 1992: 106–11; Roy 2009 has many interesting comments on the binding of magical power into objects).

There are also suggestions that sorcerers could be involved in the actual manufacture of weapons. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (11), the great sword Grásiða has been broken in combat (its name means ‘Greyflank’ and is puzzlingly in the feminine; perhaps it originally applied to some other weapon). Many years later, its shards are reforged into a pattern-welded spearhead by the *seiðskratti* Þórgrímr, who is described as being ‘skilful with iron’. He shuts himself up in his forge to remake the blade, and there is a strong suggestion that he applies more than his metal-working skills to the task. The same sorcerer is later commissioned by the friends of a slain warrior, and is asked to use sorcery to ensure that there should be no help, rest or shelter given to the killer, ‘however much men might want to give it to him’ (*ibid*: 18).

Another kind of sorcerous strength or advantage in combat can be seen in the resistance of *seiðr*-workers to intense heat. In Eddic poetry we may think of Óðinn between the fires in *Grímnismál*, and the sorceress Gullveig in *Voluspá* 21. It should not be forgotten that the use of fire was a regular feature in Viking-Age combat that took place around buildings, and the burning of people inside a hall is a recurring motif in the saga literature (the death of Njál is the best-known example). An explicit link between the Óðinnic ability to withstand heat and the capacity to extract victory from a hall-burning is made in *Hrólf’s saga kraka*. Hrólfr and his men, who have already been tested by Aðils’ fires, survive the latter’s attempt to burn them in their hall by cutting their way out through the side-walls and fighting in the open. We can compare this with another spell in the *Ljóðatal*:

Þat kann ek it sjaunda:	This seventh I know:
ef ek sé hávan loga	if I see a great hall
sal um seessmǫgum,	blazing over bench-mates,
brennrat svá breitt	that fire cannot spread so far
at ek honum bjargigak;	that I cannot save it;
þatt kann ek galdr at gala	I know the *galdr*B62 to chant.

Hávamál 152;
translation after Page 1995: 213 with my amendments The idea of invulnerability is also a constant theme, the intent to protect one's own forces while attacking those of the enemy. This recurs in two more spells from *Hávamál*:

Þat kann ek it ellipta:	This eleventh I know:
ef ek skal til orrostu	if I to battle
leiða langvini,	shall lead old friends,
undir randir ek gel,	under shields I chant,
en þeir með ríki fara	and in strength they go
heilir hildar til,	safe into battle,
heilir hildi frá,	safe from battle,
koma þeir heilir hvaðan.	every time they come back safe.
Þat kann ek it þrettánda:	This thirteenth I know:
ef ek skal þegn ungan	if I get to sprinkle
verpa vatni á,	a young lad with water,
munat hann falla,	he will not fall
þótt hann í folk komi;	if he goes into battle;
hnígra sá halr fyr hjǫrum.	that fighter will never fall to the sword.

Hávamál 156, 158;
translation after Page 1995: 214 with my amendments Of course, several of these functions also reappear in Snorri's words from *Ynglingasaga*:

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlog manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera monnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá monnum vit eða afl ok gefa oðrum.

Óðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power, and which he performed himself, that which is called *seiðr*. By means of it he could know the futures of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death

or misfortune or sickness, as well as take men's wits or strength from them and give them to others.

Ynglingasaga 7; my translation

Battle magic could also take quite other forms, and tackle different kinds of combat-related problems. *Hrólfs saga kraka* (32) presents a case in which sorcery is used to deceive an entire army in camp, lulling the troops collectively into a false sense of security in advance of an attack by their opponents. As we have seen before, the sorcery is performed by a high-ranking individual, in this case Queen Skuld who leads the attacking army in person and later actually participates in the fighting.

This account also contains sexual elements. Skuld uses *galdrar* and *gerningar* to conceal the approach of her army from Hrólf and his champions. Although it is not stated explicitly, this magic seems to take the form of a carnal lassitude that oppresses its victims, as the soldiers in the targeted army devote their time exclusively to sexual games with their women. Even when the enemy are actually upon them, the troops simply ignore them in favour of visiting the tents of their mistresses. One of Hrólfr's champions, Hjalti, breaks the spell in a very strange fashion. Having had sex with his partner, he asks her if she would prefer two twenty-year-olds or a man of eighty – when she chooses the former he calls her a whore and bites off her nose. This bizarre episode, which is very hard to explain in its unsettling mixture of sexual sorcery and sudden, brutal violence, at last frees Hrólfr's troops to engage Skuld and her army (Saxo has a similar version of the tale).

Sorcery for sorcerers

Different rules seem to have applied when sorcerers fought each other. Duels of this kind, such a common feature of both Sámi and circumpolar belief, are also found in the Old Norse sources. A graphic example of the motif in its most exaggerated form can be found in the fourteenth-century fantasy *Gongu-Hrólfs saga* (33), describing a battle in northern Russia in which the sorcerers of each side engage each other and the enemy troops. While encased in a narrative that is clearly of the Romance tradition, the account of the sorcerers' duel and its components has many earlier parallels, and is worthy of closer study. The description occupies most of a chapter in the saga, but here we can profitably

isolate the key events in sequence. The two forces have been fighting for two days, with Hrólfr's army protected by the dwarf sorcerer Mondull, and that of their enemy King Eiríkr watched over by the evil sorcerer Grímr Ægir, who has the power to raise the dead to fight for him. The third day of battle begins, and we can follow the two sorcerers' actions in parallel:

Mondull	Grímr Ægir
Dresses in a cover-all black coat, with a deerskin-lined yellow cloth bag, and carries a bow and quiver	
	Attempts to raise the dead from the previous day's fighting, but is enraged when he cannot
The two armies charge towards each other	
	Charges ahead of his men, screaming loudly and shaking a cloud of dust from a bag he has brought
Shakes his own bag, releasing a wind that blows the dust against Grímr's men, blinding them	
	Enraged, fires an arrow at Mondull
Replies with an arrow of his own, which meets the other point to point in mid-air, so that both arrows drop to the ground. This is repeated thrice.	
The fighting is fierce, and Hrólfr attempts to engage Grímr personally	
	Changes into a dragon and takes to the air, spewing venom at Hrólfr
Uses the bag to catch Grímr's venom, then throws it at one of Eiríkr's champions, killing him	
	Kills nine men with his venom, then resumes human form and goes straight for Mondull
Dives into the earth to escape Grímr	
	Dives after Mondull, and the ground closes over them both
The battle rages fiercer than ever, when 15 longships approach the shore, captained by two men in masks; they join forces with Hrólfr and press Eiríkr very hard	
	Reappears and joins the battle, killing all before him; uninjured by the

masked men's attack

The battle rages; Eiríkr's standard-bearer is killed, as are many heroes on both sides; some fight with magically-strengthened weapons and armour

Kills many of Hrólfr's men, including one of the masked fighters. Changes shape constantly, from dragon to snake, wild boar and bull

Hrólfr challenges Grímr to personal combat and they fight viciously, Grímr burning Hrólfr with his hot breath and churning up the earth around them. The remaining masked man kills King Eiríkr and the latter's army flees

Reappears and tries to help Hrólfr, but his sword does not bite Grímr's skin. Takes up a magic sword and rubs its edge with his spittle, and succeeds in hamstringing Grímr

Tries to escape into the earth, but fails and is held fast. Begins to speak

Thrusts a piece of wood into Grímr's mouth to prevent him uttering a curse, and tells Hrólfr to stab him. He must take care not to cut off his limbs, or they will turn into snakes. Covers Grímr's face with a shield, saying that his death-gaze is fatal.

Hrólfr kills Grímr, who dies thrashing against the earth and then slowly fades to nothing. Hrólfr collapses in exhaustion, while his army takes possession of the field

Explains that his own life was saved by escaping into the earth, saying that 'I had more friends down there than he [Grímr] had'

Several key themes will be familiar here from earlier accounts related above: the shape-changing opponents, the sinking into the earth, the enlistment of supernatural aid from elsewhere (Mondull's mysterious underground 'friends'), the power of a sorcerer's saliva, the magically-strengthened weapons and armour. The killing eye of a dying sorcerer also occurs in relation to the same family of *seiðmenn* described above from *Laxdæla saga*, when both of Kotkell's sons have bags placed over their heads before being executed. The reasons for this are made clear when a small rip is found in one of the bags, enabling Stígandi to catch a glimpse of the hillside across the valley. The text tells us that:

…þar var fagrt landsleg ok grasloðit; en því var líkast, sem hvirfilvindr komi at; sneri um jorðunni, svá at aldregi síðan kom þar gras upp. Þar heitir nú á Brennu.

It was a fine stretch of land and rich with grass; but suddenly it was as if a whirlwind came, and turned over the earth so that no grass came up there again. The place is still called Brenna [‘Burnt’].

Laxdæla saga (38); my translation

Special precautions clearly needed to be taken when going up against sorcerers in a physical attack. The sagas describe several instances in which such people are killed and disposed of in ways that can be paralleled in witchcraft traditions in many parts of the globe. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (19) for example, the old sorceress Auðbiorg, who has killed twelve men by magic, is seized and stoned to death. She is buried under a stone cairn in a remote place by the sea. Her brother Þorgrímr, who is mentioned below, also pursued violent sorcery; he too is later killed in a similar fashion and buried beside his sister. We have already seen in chapter 3 how the 80 *seiðmenn* led by Rognvaldr réttilbeini were burned, while his grandson and his followers were drowned. The family of *seiðmenn* described above meet a combination of these fates: Kotkell, his wife Gríma and his son Stígandi are stoned to death and buried under cairns, while their other son Hallbiorn slíkisteinsauga is drowned (*ibid*: 37f). Even this is not sufficient, as the body is washed ashore and buried, after which the dead man haunts the district for a short time before finally sinking into the earth.

The idea of the counter-spell also seems to have played a prominent part in the *seiðr* complex. This is a common phenomenon in the structure of popular magic the world over, and sometimes goes by the term *Gegenzauber* in the literature. In the Old Norse sources we find the concept of *rísta seiðvillur*, meaning approximately ‘to draw [or: ‘cut’] *seiðr* astray’, a phrase that suggests the use of runes. Some of these descriptions are very late indeed, which makes it doubly difficult to determine if any Viking-Age reality lay behind the tales. One of the most graphic examples is again from *Gongu-Hrólfs saga*. In chapter 28 of the saga, twelve male sorcerers have mounted a *seiðr*-platform to work magic against Hrólfr and his men. However, one of the intended victims cuts counter-spells into the platform, with the result that the sorcerers’ malice is turned back upon themselves. The sorcerers become deranged, destroying the platform and dispersing in all directions, either jumping over cliffs to their deaths, or drowning themselves in swamps and in the sea.

In considering counter-magic, there is another Óðinnic spell from the *Ljóðatal* that seems to imply something of this kind:

Þat kann ek it sétta:	This sixth I know:
ef mik særir þegn	if a fighting-man wounds me
á rótum rams viðar,	by the roots of a strong young tree,
ok þann hal	then the man

er mik heipta kveðr,	who means evil to me
þann eta mein heldr en mik.	he it is the peril strikes, not me.

Hávamál 151; translation after Page 1995: 213 with my amendments The reference to wounding by the roots of a tree may imply some kind of runic inscription cut into wood, and thus not physical fighting at all. In any event, it is clear that the spell throws the intended damage back upon its sender. Continuing this theme we can also return for a final time to the enigmatic *Hávamál* 155, with its unsettling image of spiritual loss:

Þat kann ek it tíunda:	I know a tenth:
ef ek sé túnriður	if I see *túnriður*
leika lopti á,	moving [playing?] up in the air,
ek svá vinnk	I can so contrive it
at þær villar fara	that they go astray
sinna heimhama	from the home of their shapes
sinna heimhuga.	from the home of their minds.

Hávamál 155; my translation As we have seen in chapter 3, this seems to be a spell to deprive soul-journeying sorcerers of a way back to their bodies, presumably leaving their minds to dissipate into emptiness. This is in effect a sorcerous application of the fettering and mind-clouding battlefield spells that we have seen above, another dimension to Óðinn's qualities as the god of insanity. Óðinn's fear in *Grímnismál* (20) that his ravens – the embodiments of his mind – will not come back is also a reflection of this risk in making such a journey in another form.

The written sources also hold another example of what may be precautions taken against a dangerous aspect of the soul, one that derives from an unusual context. We have several times considered the account of a Rus' ship cremation on the Volga, recorded by the Arab diplomat Ibn Fadlan in 922. After the shipboard rituals of the scene are concluded, when the slave-woman has been raped and sacrificed, there are further ceremonies connected with the lighting of the pyre. After everyone has left the ship, the Rus' start to pack kindling around the solid timber frame of the pyre, filling up the gaps around the hull. With this done, Ibn Fadlan says that the closest relative of the dead man approaches the vessel. He is completely naked, and holding a piece of

wood which he then sets alight. The man turns around, careful to keep his back to the ship and his face away from it at all times. In one hand he holds the burning torch, while using the other to cover his anus. Maintaining this posture, he walks backwards towards the ship, and ignites the wood packed around its hull.

Lund Warmind (1995: 135) has focused on the fact that all the orifices of the man's body are either pointing away from the vessel or protected, and he interprets this in the vague sense of wishing to avoid 'contamination' of some kind. It may be that we can take this further, and suggest that he was afraid of something coming out of the ship, out of the dead perhaps, and into him. Could this be protection against the final potential 'attack' of a free-soul?

Sometimes spirits are sent to fight hostile sorcerers, instead of combat taking place between them directly. In some cases these may be linked to the enigmatic *landvættir*, the 'spirits of the land'. These are rarely described in visible form, but there is a particularly graphic account from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (33) when we see the entire country of Iceland raise itself in spiritual form to see off the unwelcome attentions of a sorcerer who has been sent to reconnoitre the country on Haraldr Gormsson's behalf. Travelling in whale-form, the man approaches the island and then travels northwest around its coasts:

Hann sá, at fjoll oll ok hólar váru fullir af landvéttum, sumt stórt, en sumt smátt. En er hann kom fyrir Vápnafjorð, þá fór hann inn á fjorðinn ok ætlaði á land atganga. Þá fór ofan ór dalnum dreki mikill ok fylgðu honum margir ormar, poddur ok eðlur, ok blésu eitir á hann; en hann lagðisk í brot ok vestr fyrir land alt fyrir Eyjafjorð; fór hann inn eptir þeim firði; þar fór móti honum fugl svá mikill, at vængirnir tóku út fjollin tveggja vegna, ok fjolði annarra fugla bæði stórir ok smáir. Braut fór hann þaðan ok vestr um landit ok svá suðr á Breiðafjorð ok stefndi þar inn á fjorð. Þar fór móti honum griðungr mikill ok óð á sæinn út ok tók at gella ógurliga; fjolði landvétta fylgði honum. Brott fór hann þaðan ok suðr um Reykjanes ok vildi ganga upp á Vikarskeiði. Þar kom í móti honum bergrisi ok hafði járnstaf í hendi, ok bar hofuðit hæra en fjollin, ok margir aðrir jotnar með honum.

He saw that all the mountains and hills were full of *landvættir*, some big and some small. And when he came to the Vápnafjorð, he swam into the fjord, intending to go ashore there. Then a great dragon came down the valley, and

following him many snakes, toads and adders, and they blew poison at him. Then he swam away, heading west along the land all the way to the Eyjafjorð, and he went into that fjord. Then there flew against him a bird so large that its wings touched the mountains on either side of the fjord, and a great number of other birds besides, both big and small. Then he backed away from there and went west round the land, and so south to Breiðafjorð and entered that fjord. Then there came against him a great bull, wading out into the water and bellowing terrifyingly; a multitude of *landvættir* followed him. Then he backed away from there south towards Reykjanes, and intended to come ashore at Vikarskeið. Then there came against him a mountain giant with an iron staff in his hand, and his head was higher than the mountains, and many other giants were with him.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar 33; translation after Hollander 1964: 173f with my amendments

The similarities with the animals represented among the Sámi *sájva* are striking.

Over and above these sorcerous duels, there is a further category of magical combat in which practitioners of *seiðr* actually take to the battlefield in the thick of the fighting. All the elements that we have considered above are combined in the most comprehensive description of battle sorcery contained in the sagas, namely the attack on Lejre by the witch-queen Skuld in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (32ff), which eventually leads to the death of the hero and all his men. Skuld is the half-sister of King Hrólfr kraki, daughter of his father Helgi Halvdansson and an *álf*-spirit. Spreading over three chapters, the account of her final assault on her half-brother is too long to reproduce in its entirety here, and elements of it have already been examined individually elsewhere, but we •may trace its components in outline: Skuld first assembles an army, using •‘great *galdrar* and *gerningar*’ to conceal this from her enemies she then uses a ‘great *seiðr*’ to summon a range of supernatural beings (‘*álfar*, *nornir* and •other vile creatures’) in a host so powerful that no mortal can withstand it as her army first approaches, and then actually camps alongside that of Hrólfr, the latter’s men pay no attention and devote themselves to sexual debauchery with •their camp followers – apparently as a result of Skuld’s sorcery Skuld is •described as having an unusually large and long tent, strangely fitted as

Skuld’s forces encircle Hrólfr’s camp, his men manage to shake off their •lassitude and go out to meet their enemies of Hrólfr’s champions, the *berserkr* Boðvarr bjarki is absent from the field, but in his stead there appears a huge bear; fighting at Hrólfr’s side, the animal kills everyone in its path and •seems impervious to missiles thinking him to have deserted the king, one of Hrólfr’s champions seeks out Boðvarr who it turns out has stayed in his tent; Boðvarr is persuaded to enter battle himself, but he complains that he could help the king far more by what he was already doing: there is a strong implication that the bear is some aspect of Boðvarr, fighting in spirit form •while the *berserkr* is in a secluded trance when Boðvarr takes the field in person, the bear disappears; it is stated that Skuld’s sorcery had no effect while ••the animal was visible Skuld sits on a *seiðr*-platform, within a black tent a ‘wolf-grey’ boar the size of a young bull emerges from Skuld’s army, with •arrows flying from every bristle; all of Hrólfr’s men who oppose it are killed as more are killed on both sides, Boðvarr notices that the dead of Skuld’s army do not fall, but rise up and carry on fighting; Hrólfr’s men are powerless ••against the re-animated dead Skuld then enters physical combat herself •Boðvarr speculates that Óðinn is fighting unseen in Skuld’s army a ‘*galdrar*-storm’ washes over the remains of Hrólfr’s army, and at last he falls together •with Boðvarr and all his champions Skuld survives, though most of her army is dead, and she takes control of the kingdom Throughout this episode, the sense of overwhelming supernatural force is constantly emphasised, with several of the heroes remarking that the battlefield itself has become a place unlike any other they have experienced – almost a place ‘between the worlds’, where normal reality has been suspended by Skuld’s sorcery. Through a combination of *seiðr*, *galdr* and *gerningar* Skuld lays spells of concealment and confusion with important sexual elements, summons supernatural beings to fight for her on the battlefield, probably transforms some aspect of herself into the terrible boar, and even reanimates the dead to fight against her enemies. The battle is finally won by a literal barrage of sorcery raining down on Skuld’s opponents, and the text describes how Hrólfr’s shield-wall is broken down by the sheer pressure of the spells.

Seiðr and battlefield resurrection

The violent associations of *seiðr* in the context of the battlefield can be extended still further in relation to the resurrection of the dead.
This feature has appeared in several of the accounts examined above, in Óðinn's relationship to the dead, in the abilities of the *valkyrjur* and also the conduct of sorceresses like Skuld in her attack on Hrólfr kraki. It of course also brings to mind another Óðinnic context with the daily rejuvenation of warriors in Valholl, whereby those of the *einherjar* killed in the day's fighting come back to life to drink all night, and to be ready for renewed combat the following morning (*Vafþrúðnismál* 41). Richard North extends this argument (1997: 108f, 131) when he suggests that it was through Freyja and *seiðr* that Óðinn was able to 'resurrect' dead warriors into their second life as *einherjar*.

In an aside here, it is worth emphasising that despite their obvious 'unreality', the desired effects of charms of this kind *could* conceivably have been suggested by actual events on the battlefield. In the vicious confusion of early medieval hand-to-hand combat, occurrences such as apparently impossible survival in a difficult situation, the chance success of a desperate attack, the sudden return to consciousness of the seemingly dead, and other similar events would not have been at all unusual. Given the importance attached to the rather complicated concept of personal luck, the supernatural explanation of striking developments in combat should not surprise us.

Dronke (1988 and 1997: 41–4) has argued forcefully that battlefield resurrection was also of crucial importance in the war between the Æsir and the Vanir, according to the description given in *Voluspá* 21–4. The divine war is hard to interpret, especially in its *Voluspá* incarnation (see the discussions of this and the other accounts in *Ynglingasaga* 4, *Skáldskarpamál* 1 and *Gylfaginning* 22: Eckhardt 1940; Dumézil 1947; Briem 1963; Östvold 1969; Nielsen 1976; Oosten 1985; Schjødt 1991). Dronke's claim that the enigmatic Gullveig here represents a golden idol which the Æsir try in vain to destroy is upheld and expanded by McKinnell (2001: 404–7, 412ff).

Dronke has also made the interesting suggestion that the *volva* Heiðr not only uses the medium of *seiðr* to insinuate the cults of the Vanir among the people, but that it is also through this magic that the Vanir remain unaffected by Óðinn's assault (Dronke 1997: 4f). She draws a parallel between the rebirth of Gullveig, who survives the three attempts by the Æsir to kill her with spears and burning, and the last lines of strophe 24: *Knátto vanir vígspá / vollo*

sporna, ‘Vanir were – by a war-charm- / live and kicking on the plain’. Dronke cites the similar use of *sporna* in *Oddrúnargrátr* 8, in which ‘bitter’ *galdrar* are used to ease childbirth. From this she argues for a repetition of the theme of Gullveig’s survival, and concludes that through the *vígspá*, the war-spell, the Vanir were literally resurrected on the battlefield.

Tolley perhaps overstates the case when he argues that “*seiðr* emerges as the magic needed for rebirth, used by the Vanir in their war against the Æsir” (1995a: 58; cf. Dronke 1997: 133), but that the *volur*’s power in some way extended into yet another field of battlefield ritual is certainly implied by the *Voluspá* description of the conflict between the divine families.

Dronke’s conclusion as to the real role of *seiðr*, the Vanir magic, in the society of the gods is startling and worth quoting in full:

By this union [between the divine families in an effort to end the war] the unfailing killing power of Óðinn was united with the unfailing regenerative power of Freyja. Death became no more than the necessary condition for the renewal of life, a sacrifice made to ensure the future. Freyja became, in social terms, the gods’ *blótgyðja*, their ‘priestess of sacrifice’ (as Snorri says). Her magic knowledge, her *seiðr*, ensured that their sacrificial rites did not fail. The war between the Æsir and the Vanir had changed the constitution of the gods, and introduced into the Æsir community deities who were professionally, as it were, masters in the art of reviving life after death – an art the gods will have great need of at Ragnarok.

Dronke 1997: 44

This idea is admittedly based largely on Snorri, but if Dronke, Tolley and North are correct then this is of fundamental importance for understanding the interrelationship of the different elements present in *seiðr* – its sexual overtones, and the possible outcome of sexual congress in birth and, aided by magic, rebirth. In this context it is worth remembering the child-bearing connotations of the term *seiðberendr*, which we examined in chapter 3. In the divine war, we see the explicit extension of these functions to the battlefield. This would explain the combination of sexual and violent functions that *seiðr* took on after its Vanir mistress, Freyja, taught its use to Óðinn of the Æsir. Not least, in this interpretation *seiðr* perhaps becomes the key to the gods’ (and humans’) possible survival beyond Ragnarok, just as *gandr* may have been one

of the forces through which the world was created from Ginnungagap as discussed in chapter 2.

Seiðr and the shifting of shape

In the preceding chapters we have seen many examples of the transformation of the *hamr* and *hugr*, the classic shape-shifting and the central role that this plays both in the stories of the gods and in Norse sorcery itself. For the former we even find reflections in the material culture, such as the image on one of the picture stones from Lärbro Stora Hammars on Gotland, showing a man transforming into a bird and probably depicting Óðinn returning to his hall after obtaining the mead of poetry (Fig. 6.4). The same image has also been found on a scabbard chape excavated in the Black Earth at Birka (Ambrosiani 2001: 12f), which as an item of weaponry is an interesting context for a motif of this kind, and there are many others (some of which may depict the smith Volundr, *e.g.* Helmbrecht 2013). Similarly, parallels with shamanistic shape-shifting beliefs have been drawn with the so-called 'puzzle pictures' identified as recurring motifs in late Iron Age animal art, as beings and bodies restlessly intertwine and change form according to the viewer's perspective (*e.g.* Neiß 2009).

Shape-shifting among humans has left a great many traces in the written sources. Working from her original studies of the *mara*, Catharina Raudvere (1996) has collated many of the examples of this phenomenon among women, and rightly emphasised the ubiquity of these conceptions in the Old Norse texts. In common with ideas about the *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* and so on, the shifting of shape is hardly regarded as magical at all in many of the sagas. This is an important point, because it tells us that this is not so much a dimension of sorcery as something more fundamental about the way in which human beings – and, by extension, animals – were understood in the Viking Age (see also Strömbäck 1935: ch. 4 and Ellis Davidson 1978 for excellent overviews of this material).

In the second half of this chapter we shall consider this at length, principally in connection with animal-warriors such as the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* that have always been one of the most prominent aspects of Viking-Age culture as externally perceived. We shall examine these people as individuals and as an institution, and consider how their rituals of shape-

changing fit together with the battle magic and other aspects of the *seiðr* complex discussed previously. In preparation for this, we must first look in more detail at shape-changing in other aggressive contexts, and here with special reference once again to sexual situations.

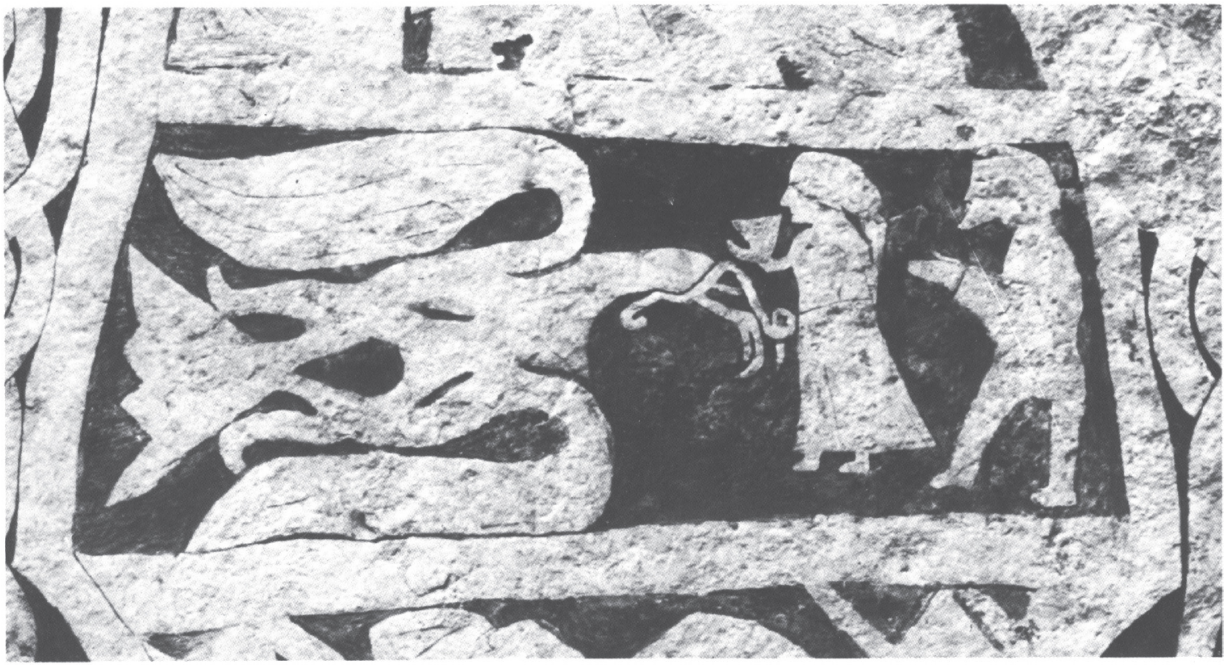


Fig. 6.4 Detail of picture stone III from Lärbro Stora Hammars on Gotland, showing a man transforming into a bird – probably Óðinn returning to his hall after obtaining the mead of poetry (after Ellis Davidson 1982: 49).

The shifting of shape could even extend to full-scale bodily transformations in an active sense, as opposed to the spirit manifestations that we have seen earlier. Sometimes this could incorporate other elements of *seiðr* that are by now familiar, such as an emphasis on sex as a medium for sorcery. Perhaps the classic example of this combination occurs in *Volsunga saga* (7), when Signý Volsungsdóttir exchanges physical appearances with a *seiðkona*. The sorceress then sleeps with Signý's husband, king Siggeirr, and through her changed form deceives him into thinking she is his wife. At the same time, Signý travels to the forest and there deliberately embarks on a prolonged sexual encounter with her brother, Sigmundr Volsungsson, who does not recognise her as she has taken on the other woman's appearance. The result of this incestuous union is that Signý gives birth to Sinfjotli.

On the one hand, Signý's ultimate purpose in 'creating' Sinfjotli is destructive – she wishes to avenge her father, Volsungr Rerisson, and most of her brothers, all of whom who were murdered by her husband Siggeirr. By committing incest with her brother, Signý ensures that the resulting child will be of pure Volsung blood, the perfect avenger for the primogenitor of his line (together with Sigmundr, Sinfjotli later burns Siggeirr and his men in the royal hall; her mission accomplished, Signý walks into the blazing building to die with the husband whose death she has engineered). However, the means of achieving that destruction is not only sexual in nature, but takes a form with specific connotations in relation to the kind of sorcery involved. Several themes recur here: the incest that brings to mind again the sexual taboos surrounding the performance of *seiðr*, and the idea that this crossing of permitted boundaries conveys with it not just social approbation but also a kind of peculiarly terrible power unattainable in any other way.

In view of the role played by *seiðr* in his conception, it is significant that Sinfjotli will later become a shape-changing Óðinnic warrior – he transforms into a wolf, fighting in a berserk rage while in that form, and is later cured of his battle wounds by the intervention of another Óðinnic animal, a raven bringing him healing leaves. We should also note the generational element, for Sinfjotli is joined in his berserk fighting by his father Sigmundr, also in wolf form. This link may in fact go back even further than the brothers, because the name of Volsungr himself has been interpreted to mean 'son of Volsi', the phallus-god familiar from *Volsa þáttr* (Turville-Petre 1964: 201).

Has Sigmundr also been transformed by the consequences of an incestuous sexual act performed by a woman under the power of a *seiðr* ritual? If so, this gives an interesting insight into the range of consequences that one aspect of *seiðr* could be thought to have, physically changing both the object of sexual desire and the outcome of that encounter, even many years after it took place (Sinfjotli has grown to adolescence by the time he gains his wolf-power).

The role of the supernatural wolf is also echoed by an event earlier in the saga, because having murdered Volsungr, Siggeir goes on to kill Volsungr's sons (Signý's brothers). This he does by having them tied up in the forest and left at the mercy of a great she-wolf, which comes at midnight for nine nights, on each occasion killing one of the men. By the tenth night, Sigmundr is the only one left alive, but aided by Signý he manages to kill the wolf by ripping

out its tongue: the saga notes that the creature was rumoured to be Siggeirr's own mother, transformed by *seiðr* into wolf form.

This unusually detailed example is worth summarising in order to emphasise the sheer number of factors that coincide in this particular *seiðr* ritual, in terms of both its origins, performance, practice, and its direct effects: ••The cause: Death in battle of an Óðinnic hero (Volsungr) Murder of •Volsungr's sons by a woman transformed into wolf-form by *seiðr* The ritual: •Destructive and violent objectives (vengeance for Volsungr and his sons) Working of illusion and shape-shifting (the *seiðkona* and Signý exchange •physical appearances) Sexual purpose and performance (the *seiðkona* sleeps •with Siggeirr, Signý sleeps with Sigmundr) Breaking of incest taboos (1. oblique incestual connotations of *seiðr* itself; 2. Sigmundr is Signý's brother) ••The results: A child born of incest (Signý gives birth to Sinfjotli) Both child •and father become Óðinnic warriors, like Volsungr Both child and father •transform into wolves, like the woman who killed their uncles/brothers Volsungr is avenged when Siggeirr is slain by Sinfjotli and Sigmundr The notion of the birth of a child as a possible consequence of *seiðr* has also been taken up in more symbolic terms by other authors, such as Jenny Jochens (1996: 74). The leading proponent of *seiðr* as explicitly sexual magic, she draws parallels between the functions of the female body at the level of society's most basic expectations (receiving a penis and expelling a baby) and the role of the *seiðr*-performer (receiving a staff as penis substitute, and through sorcery enabling the birth of children with special qualities).

In another example, Näsström (1995: 83f) has drawn attention to the episode from the *Sorla þáttr*, in which Freyja makes promises to Óðinn and in order to fulfil them takes the form of a beautiful woman with the *valkyrja*-and staff-name Gondull. On three successive occasions she seduces a king with the aid of some kind of narcotic drink, and convinces him to overstep various boundaries of acceptable conduct, culminating in the murder of his best friend's wife. She finally releases him from her charm, and having achieved the ruin of two households, she declares them all to be dedicated to Óðinn. As the magic fades, the king glimpses her true face, *ok sýndist honum þá svort ok mikil*, 'and it seemed to him she was black and great'. In this we see again the supreme combination of the familiar pattern: shape-shifting sorcery with a sexual theme and a sexual outcome (the murdered woman is the object of the

king's desire), expressed in violence that results in general destruction, with the whole affair prosecuted by Freyja at Óðinn's command.

We can now follow these patterns back into the field, and at last to the physical prosecution of Viking warfare.

Berserkir and *ulfheðnar*

The *berserkir* and to a lesser extent the *ulfheðnar* are comparatively well-known aspects of the Viking world, at least by comparison with the different categories of sorcerers examined in chapter 3. A measure of this is of course that they have given the English language the word 'berserk'. Most of their primary qualities were collected by Snorri in *Ynglingasaga* 6, in his description of Óðinn:

[…] hanns menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjoldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar; þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá; þat er kallaðr berserksgangr.

[…] his [Óðinn's] men went [into battle] without mailcoats and were as wild as dogs or wolves, they bit their shields, were as strong as bears or bulls; they killed people, but they themselves were hurt by neither fire nor iron; this is called going berserk.

Ynglingasaga 6; my translation

The term *berserkr* was once thought to refer to the wearing of a bearskin, a 'bear-shirt' derived from *ber-*, 'bear'. This would fit well with the idea of the *ulfheðnar* as 'wolfskinwearers', which is an uncontroversial derivation (cf. Müller 1967), but it would certainly not explain the practical encumbrance of actually wearing a bearskin. Curiously, very few of those advocating the 'bear-shirt' variant seem to have considered this. However, the term is usually interpreted now as meaning 'bare-shirted', following Noreen (1932) and Kuhn (1968), which could refer either to a man entering battle wholly or partly naked, or else without armour in the sense of a 'shirt' of mail (see also Falk 2015). Whichever interpretation is followed, there are clearly a number of bear-like associations consciously intended in the name, as we shall see.

Several comprehensive summaries have been made of sources relating to the *berserkir*, with an attempt to place them in some kind of social context

(*e.g.* Güntert 1912; Lid 1956; Höfler 1973b; Nordberg 2003; Näsström 2006; Malinowski 2009; Samson 2011). As we have seen, Höfler has also considered these warriors in great detail in his works on shape-changing and military brotherhoods (1934, 1973a). In addition, Glosecki (1989: 197–210) has traced a very broad range of parallels for bear imagery in a warrior setting with explicit links to shamanic belief systems; these works include further reading on this subject and only a small selection of sources will be considered here.

Probably the earliest known reference to these warriors is found in the *Haraldskvæði* of Þórbjorn hornklofi. Both *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* are mentioned, and a clear distinction is made between them. The poem was probably composed around 900, and in part describes the Battle of Hafrsfjorðr which took place *c.*872. The details of the warriors are graphic beyond the normal conventions of skaldic poetry – they are described as drinking blood, for example – and they were clearly seen as something separate from other types of combatant:

Hlaðnir oru hǫldða ok hvítra skjalda, vigra vestroenna ok valskra sverða; grenjuðu berserkir, guðr vas þeim á sinnum, emjuðu ulfheðnar ok isǫrn dúðu.

At berserkja reiðu vilk spyrja, bergir hræsævar, hversu es fengit þeims i folk vaða vigdjǫrfum verum?

Ulfheðnar heita, þeirs i orrostum blóðgar randir bera; vigrar rjóða, es til vígs koma; þeims's þar sýst saman; áræðismǫnnum einum hykk þar undir felisk skyli sá enn skilvísi, þeim's í skjǫld hǫggva.

They [the ships of Haraldr's fleet] were loaded with farmer-chiefs and broad shields, with Vestland spears and Frankish swords; *berserkir* screamed, the battle was on, *ulfheðnar* howled and shook their spears.

Of the *berserkr*-fury I would ask, about the drinkers of the corpse-sea [blood]: what are they like, these men who go happy into battle?

Ulfheðnar they are called, who bear bloody shields in the slaughter; they redden spears when they join the fighting; there they are arranged for their task; there I know that the honourable prince places his trust only in brave men, who hack at shields.

Þórbjorn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði* 8, 20, 21; my translation

One interesting detail here is that the *ulfheðnar* are consistently shown as carrying spears; the relevance of this will become clear when we examine the archaeological sources below. It is also implied that these warriors fight in formation and have a specific role in the battle. *Berserkir* are also mentioned in a *lausavísa* of Viga-Styrr Þórgrímsson, supposedly composed in 983, but this does not add any detail about them. Beyond this we find the *berserkir* named in only five other poems, most of them from the later Middle Ages.

The ‘separateness’ of the *berserkir* as described in the skaldic verses is also seen in early medieval legal concepts of liminality and exclusion, expressed in some of the terms for outlaws. A murderer – that is one who had not declared a killing in the proper way – could be called a *morðvargr*, ‘killer-wolf’, and the outlaw was a ‘wolf in the hallowed places’ (see Jacoby 1974: 35–45 for a review of this terminology).

The saga accounts of *berserkir* are greatly stereotyped, even in texts which otherwise retain much of an individual character. In one version of their nature, *berserkir* appear in the bodyguards of kings, often in groups or small units containing a specified number of troops, usually twelve. They fight at the vanguard of the army, and in the prows of ships.

This pattern is found in *Vatnsdæla* saga, which specifically mentions the wolfskins worn by the *ulfheðnar*, and also in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. In the latter we also encounter other overtones of these warriors, namely an actual change of shape – Egill’s grandfather is called Kveldúlfr, ‘Evening-Wolf’, and his foul temper is legendary. *Berserkir* also appear in several of the kings’ sagas from *Heimskringla*. A particularly dramatic example occurs in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (33) and sets out the battle-rage of Boðvarr bjarki – one of the possible analogues of Beowulf. We have examined the battle between the armies of Hrólfr and Skuld above, but the intervention of Boðvarr in animal form is worth quoting in full. At this point in the battle, the two armies are engaged, but no-one has seen Boðvarr on the field:

Þad siä þeir Hioru(ardur) og lid hanz ad biorn einn mikill för fyrir Hr(olfz) kongz monnum, og jafnan þar næst sem kongurinn er. Hann drepur fleyre menn med sijnum hramme enn fimm adrer kappar kongz. Hriota af honum hogg og skotvopn, enn hann brytur vndir sig bæde menn og hesta af lidi Hieruardar kongz, og allt þad sem j nänd er mylur hann med sijnum tonnum, so ad jllur kur kiemur j lid Hieruard(ar) kongz.

Hiorvarðr and his men saw a great bear advancing in front of King Hrólfr's troop, and it was always beside the king. It killed more men with its paw than five of the king's champions [could]. Blows and missiles bounced off it, as it used its weight to crush both men and horses in Hiorvarðr's army, and with its teeth it tore everything in reach, so that a palpable fear spread through the ranks of King Hiorvarðr's army.

Hrólfs saga kraka (33);
translation after Byock 1998, with my amendments

As we have seen above, when Hjalti goes looking for Boðvarr, believing him to be avoiding combat, he finds him alone and apparently unoccupied in the king's tent. Boðvarr is reluctant to enter the battle but eventually agrees, with the words,

Og siegie eg þier ad sonnu, ad nu máá eg morgumhlutum minna lid veita konginum enn ädur þu kalladir mig vpp hiedan.

In truth, I can tell you that in many ways I can now offer the king far less support than before you woke me.

Hrólfs saga kraka (33);
translation after Byock 1998, with my amendments

As soon as Boðvarr enters battle, the bear disappears. The implication is clearly that he has been fighting in bear form, while his physical body is 'asleep' (like Óðinn in *Ynglingasaga*) or in a trance of some kind (see Schjødt 2003 for a study of this passage in the context of *berserkir* initiations, and Tolley 2007 for a reinterpretaion in the light of supposed Sámi influences).

The other saga version of the *berserkir* places them in the role of stock villain, often grotesquely exaggerated. They are depicted as foils for the heroes to kill and thereby qualify their manhood, and often as threats to women. Examples of this pattern occur in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* amongst many others.

This process of Romantic development appears to have got under way even by the end of the Viking Age, and some scholars have therefore argued that the *berserkir* were entirely a literary invention (*e.g.* von See 1961). Such a viewpoint is extreme, and ignores the relationship of the *berserkir* stories to the broader beliefs in shape-changing and sorcery. Not least it is refuted by the archaeological evidence which, as we shall see below, indicates beyond any

doubt that animal-warriors were a part of the Nordic thought-world long before the Viking Age. Furthermore, there are also late sources that hint at other dimensions to these warriors. One such is from *Volsunga saga*, and concerns the hero Sigmundr and his son Sinfjotli, who he has fathered on his sister Signý as the result of the shape-changing *seiðr* ritual that we reviewed above. Venturing into the forest – the marginal setting is perhaps significant – the two men come to a house:

[…] tvá menn sofandi í húsinu meðdigrum gullhringum. Þeir hofðu orðit fyrir óskopum, því at úlfhamir hengu í húsinu yfir þeim. It tíunda hvert dægr máttu þeir komast ór homunum. Þeir váru konungasynir. Þeir Sigmundr [ok Sinfjotli] fóru í hamina ok máttu eigi ór komast, ok fylgdi sú náttúra, sem áðr var, létu ok vargsroddu. Þeir skildu báðir roddina.

[…] inside it were two sleeping men, with thick gold rings. A spell had been cast upon them, so that wolfskins hung over them in the house. Only every tenth day could they shed the skins. They were the sons of kings. Sigmundr and Sinfjotli put the skins on and could not get them off, and the supernatural power [*náttúra*] followed, as it was before, they howled like wolves. They both understood the howling.

Volsunga saga 8; my translation after Byock 1990: 44

The two men make their separate ways into the forest, and each takes on up to seven men in combat. If they are attacked by more than seven, each man howls in his wolf's voice and his companion comes to his assistance. After one occasion when Sinfjotli does not call for Sigmundr, despite being attacked by eleven men, the two wolf-men quarrel and begin to fight each other. There is a suggestion here that they also take on the behaviour of wolves, as Sigmundr jumps for Sinfjotli's throat and bites him in the windpipe. When they find that they cannot remove the skins, the two men return to what the text calls a *jarðhús*, an 'earth-house' or underground dwelling, which implies that they are even living in a den like wolves. On the tenth day when they can finally take off the skins, they burn them in the fire and resume their normal lives.

Several aspects of this passage are worthy of comment, such as the fact that the skin is called an *úlfhamr*, 'wolf-shape'. Again we find the number nine, in that this is the number of days when the power of the skins is active. In

the howling signals that the two men give to one another to call for assistance, perhaps we can find the echo of some kind of battle calls. A similar episode of warriors in wolf-form occurs in *Ála saga flekks* (10), in which the relevant sorcery is managed by a woman called by the *valkyrja*-name of Hildr.

The saga descriptions must at best be considered to be very remote from any Viking-reality behind the *berserkir*. The skaldic poetry provides a contemporary view, but little detail. Even so, in Þórbjorn's verse we see a window open briefly on a scene of terrible ferocity, in which a class of warriors defined as separate from others unleashes a killing madness, howling and screaming, and drinking blood. However, these are not the only Viking-Age sources, and if we move outside Scandinavia to examine foreign texts that describe people from the far north, there are some surprising discoveries to make.

The battlefield of animals

The first of these is a single eye-witness account of a Scandinavian army in combat that may give us a unique vision of the *berserkir* in action. Like so many of the more detailed circumstantial sources, it concerns the Vikings in the East, and the activities of the Rus'.

In 970 the Greek historian Leo Diaconus accompanied the Byzantine emperor as secretary on his Bulgarian campaigns, fighting a Rus' incursion under their leader Sviatoslav. In the eighth and ninth books of his *Historia*, Leo describes the Rus' as they went into battle, something which he saw with his own eyes as he was present on the field. He notes how they fought with an incredible frenzied madness that neither he nor any others of the Byzantines had encountered before. Leo goes on to add that the Rus' made roaring sounds like the cries of animals, and also that they howled in an eerie, unsettling way that shocked their opponents. The Rus' are described as attacking in a blind rage and without regard to their own defence – exactly how the *berserkir* appear in the Scandinavian sources. A special example seems to have been set here by the Rus' commander, Sviatoslav, who fought with such screaming abandon that Leo actually thought he had gone insane. Bearing in mind the long field experience of the veteran Byzantine military, it is clear that the imperial secretary witnessed something truly out of the ordinary (Ellis Davidson 1976: 113).

John Skylitzes also collated a contemporary account of the same campaign – this is the document that we have seen above, which mentions the presence of female warriors among the Rus' dead. With regard to Leo's relations of the Rus' battle-frenzy, Skylitzes also has something similar though emerging in a different context. After a battle, the Byzantines hear the Rus' mourning their dead, and Skylitzes describes a strange, high-pitched howling that terrified the Greek soldiers. He writes that it did not sound like the conventional wailing of lamentation, and like Leo Diaconus he compares it to the noises made by animals (Cedrenus, II: 407; Skylitzes 15: 12, 2010: 286f; Ellis Davidson 1972: 25). This may even have been the same event recounted in Leo's *Historia*, when the Rus' emerged from a besieged fortification at night, to retrieve their dead from the previous day's fighting. He describes how the Rus' went among the slain in the light of the full moon, building great pyres of logs outside the wall, on which they cremated the dead. Male and female prisoners were brought out and sacrificed, along with young animals. Cockerels were killed and thrown into the river, and offerings were made of what appears to have been alcohol. This seems very similar to the rituals performed in conjunction with the Volga ship-cremation witnessed by Ibn Fadlan, and like him Leo was appalled at the wild ferocity of the northern barbarians (*ibid*).

We may dimly perceive something similar from other non-Scandinavian contexts too. Here we can consider the elements of cultural confusion evident in, for example, Anglo-Saxon descriptions of Viking armies such as the poems on the battles of Maldon and Brunanburh. In the former poem there are references to the Vikings as *wælwulfas*, 'slaughter-wolves' (*Battle of Maldon*, l. 96), and wolf-imagery is very often employed when discussing Scandinavian forces in the field. This may be poetic convention, but perhaps something more. There is an old debate on the questionable reality of Viking armies' aggressive paganism as seen in the chronicles of scandalised churchmen, but the point is worth making again (for an excellent parallel to this process, see Jill Lepore's account of the shamanic warrior cults of the Algonquins as perceived by the equally religiously-motivated colonists with whom they came into conflict in seventeenth-century New England – Lepore 1999: 100–21).

Another startling text from the Viking Age depicts a very different setting for the *berserkir*, not least in that it is a scene of peaceful festivities. Again it is an eye-witness account, written by the tenth-century Byzantine emperor

Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae.* This is a volume less well-known than the emperor's treatise on imperial administration, but which contains interesting details of the ceremonies of the court. The relevant passage describes a scene at an imperial banquet during the Christmas celebrations sometime in Constantine's reign (912–59), when two sections of the guard and the naval mercenaries were permitted to entertain their employer with seasonal ceremonies from their homelands.

These foreign troops are referred to in the text as 'Goths', but we know that no such tribes were present in Byzantium at this time, the last of them having left in the sixth century. In the tenth century the imperial bodyguard was composed of Rus', or Varangians. The text would therefore seem to describe the customs of Scandinavians. The dance thus described includes several elements of great interest for the study of Viking animal-warriors. It begins with the entry of groups of men referred to as '*veneters*' and '*prasines*' (the terms are discussed below), who take their places around a kind of master of ceremonies:

Behind him [the court official who announces the dance] stand two Goths clad in gowns [or 'cloaks'] with the hair outwards and in masks of different appearance, and in the left hand a shield, in the right by contrast a staff. The same is true for the commander and some others among the officials together with the commander of the bodyguard. As soon as the emperor has come in from his equestrian games, he orders the master of ceremonies to begin, and he in turn passes this on to the general superintendent of the acting. When this man has left the great dining room he orders them [the masked men] to come in. They rush in quickly while at the same time striking their shields with the staffs that they are carrying, and thereby make a great noise, in that they continually cry: jul, jul, and so take themselves forward almost to the holy table [*i.e.* the emperor's place]. When they have almost reached it, the two companies run in from both sides together, so as to build a double rank. Then when they have in this way run three times round the holy table, each section withdraws back to their places, the *veneters* to the left and the *prasines* to the right, and the two parties, who are called Goths, read aloud the so-called Gothic Song.

Constantine Porphyrogenitos, *De ceremoniis aulæ Byzantinæ* I: 83; my translation from the Swedish of Sjöberg 1907: 31f

The text continues with a transcription of the song, followed by the masked dancers circling again and again, always singing out their *jul* cry. In between each circuit of the dancers, a different one of the 'Goths' gets up and declaims a poem to one of their chiefs. The ranks of men come in and out of the hall as before, and finally all the men return to their places at the benches.

This is a difficult text to interpret. The beginning seems to imply that all those involved are wearing furs and masks, not only the two armed men but also the two companies that later file in. This suggestion is strengthened later on (in the part not quoted here) when it is made clear that everyone at least has a shield and staff. Sometimes all those taking part seem to be included among the 'Goths', while at other points they are divided into '*veneters*' and '*prasines*'. The meaning of these latter terms has been discussed by Sjöberg (1907: 34f) who notes that they were originally used of different troupes of circus actors, but by the age of Constantine had come to refer to different groups of military officials. There is a suggestion that all of those participating in the performance were therefore of considerable rank.

Their identity as Scandinavians is supported by two details of the text itself, and another piece of information from an additional source. Firstly, the imperial bodyguard and the fleet were the only two military units that are known to have employed Nordic mercenaries. Secondly, we should consider the seemingly phonetic Greek transcript of what the maskers cried out in their dance – the repeated word ιούλ, *jul* – which is clearly of northern origin, and would support the interpretation of these men as Rus'. This is in fact stated explicitly in a later document, the *De officiis* of Georgios Kodinos, written in the early 1300s as an expansive appendix to Constantine's own text. Kodinos seems to have been working from another manuscript that has not survived, because he provides a second version of this same yuletide ceremony that contains three new details. When the maskers enter the hall, the text reads thus:
Then come also Varangians and wish [the emperor] many years [of life] in their language, namely English, and when in pairs they clash their axes together they make a great noise.

Georgios Kodinos, *De officiis*; my translation from the Swedish of Sjöberg 1907: 35

By origin and language these dancers are clearly from northern Europe, and here we see the interesting alteration of their staves to axes. This weapon was the standard issue of the Varangian Guard, and a piece of equipment for which they were famed.

At one level the ceremony described seems to recall the later folklore traditions of the *julbock* and similar festive masks (see Gunnell 1995), but the clearly military nature of the scene is also stressed in both accounts. The furs and masks make an obvious link to the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, even if these are not, or not solely, battle rituals.

The exact detail of the performance is hard to understand, and the transcript of the 'Gothic Song' that follows the passage quoted above is a standard piece of Byzantine imperial flattery, rendered in clumsy Greek from a Latin original. The language differs markedly from the rest of the text, and given that the *De ceremoniis* as a whole is the personal work of the emperor it seems that Constantine was trying to record what the dancers actually sang. If these men *were* the Scandinavian bodyguards of the emperor, the attempt at singing his praises in an inarticulate version of his own language would fit rather well with their own traditions. The same is true of the poems subsequently addressed to their commanders.

The account of the Byzantine *jul*-ceremony brings us neatly to the archaeological evidence for the *berserkir*, because there is in fact a ceiling fresco from the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Kiev which seems to depict a drama of this kind (Gunnell 1995: 71f and references therein). The church was built by Jaroslav in 1037 and the mural was probably painted *c.*1054 (Ellis Davidson 1976: 210). Its frescoes illustrate a series of games and performances at the Hippodrome in Constantinople, in other words a similar context to the banquet described above. One such scene shows a warrior armed with a spear and wearing a mask that appears to represent a wolf or a bird, fighting with an unmasked man with a shield and axe. Gunnell (1995: 72) has noted that the axe was the weapon of the Varangian guard, as we have seen above, and also points out that one of the adjacent scenes depicts Jaroslav's daughter Ellisíf who married Haraldr harðráði of Norway – another Scandinavian connection.

From Scandinavia itself we find a greater number of depictions of warriors wearing skins (Nielsen 1999). Perhaps the earliest comes from one of the fifth-century gilded silver horns from Gallehus, now lost but surviving in early

modern drawings and since reconstructed (Fig. 6.5). Two armed humanoid figures with animal heads are shown: one of them holds a sword and appears to have the head of a wolf-like creature, while its axe-wielding counterpart seems to resemble a bird (see Oxenstierna 1956).



Fig. 6.5 Panels from the larger of the fifth-century gilt silver horns from Gallehus, now lost. Two animal-headed, armed humanoids can be seen in the lower field (after J. R. Paulli 1734).



Fig. 6.6 A ‘weapon dancer’ and an armed man in a wolf-skin – perhaps Óðinn and an ulfheðinn *– on a seventh-century helmet-plate die from Björnhövda, Torslunda, on Öland, Sweden (photo Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).*

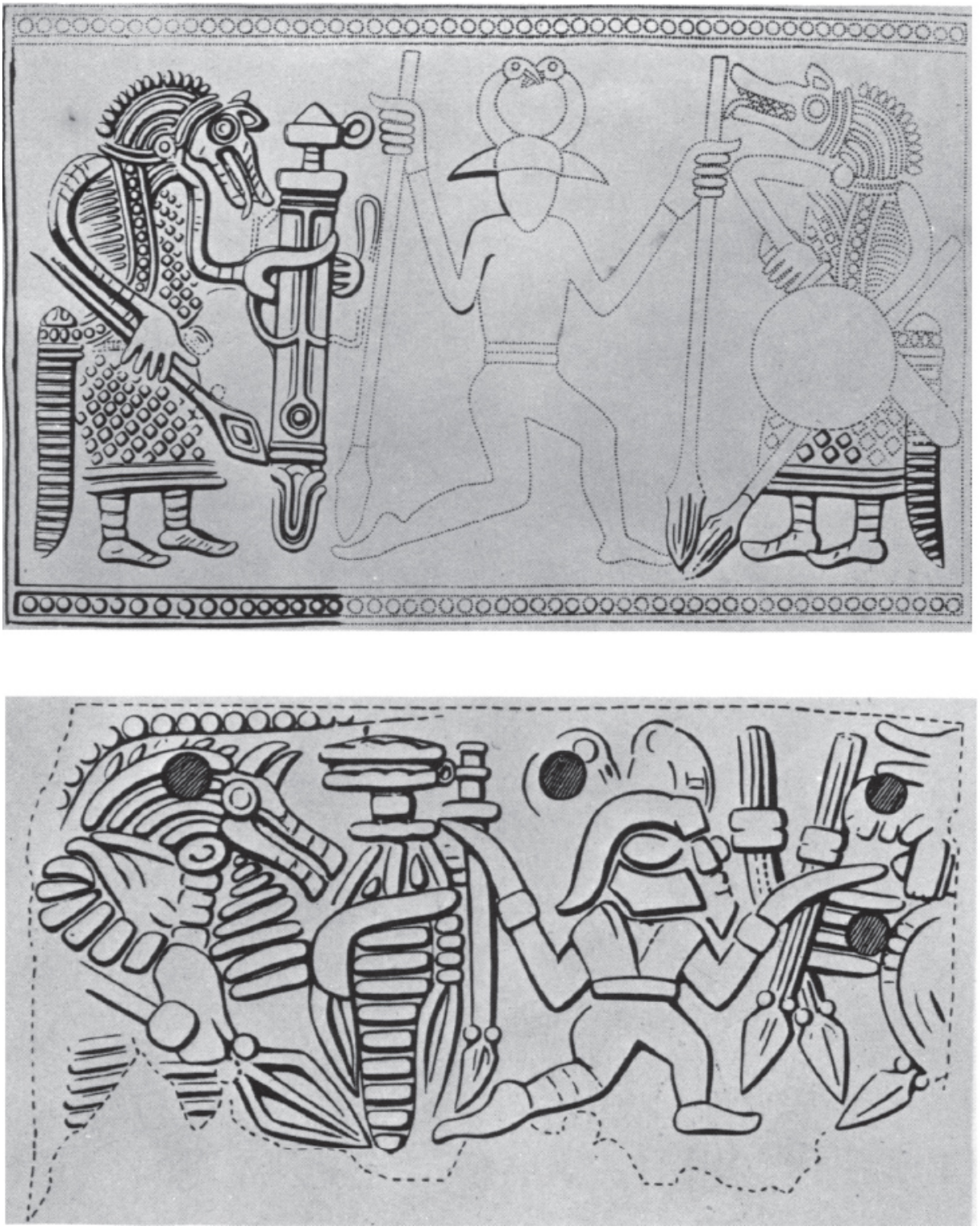


Fig. 6.7 The Migration Period pressed mounts, perhaps for helmet plates, from Gutenstein (above) and Obrigheim (below) in Germany. The close affinities

between these images and the Scandinavian depictions of ulfheðnar *and 'weapon dancers' are very clear (after Arent 1969: pl. 17–18).*

Probably the clearest such image is that found on one of a set of four bronze matrixes for the manufacture of helmet plaques, found at Torslunda on Öland and dating to the seventh century, immediately prior to the Viking Age (research on these dies is summarised in Arent 1969, Axboe 1987; see Gunnell 1995: 66–76 for more recent work). The die in question shows two figures (Fig. 6.6). To the left is an apparently one-eyed, dancing warrior, naked except for a belt, sword-sling and helmet, carrying two spears (this motif, the 'weapon dancer', is considered in more depth below). On the right of the die is a second figure apparently dressed in a wolfskin complete with mask and tail, depicted in the act of drawing a sheathed sword and holding a spear. We may remember here the spears mentioned by Þórbjorn hornklofi as attributes of the *ulfheðnar*. In 2015 at the farm of Vestervang near Rødby Fjord in south Jylland, another matrix – presumably also for a helmet – was found with a near-identical motif, though only the half with the 'dancer' is preserved (Pedersen & Rasmussen 2016).

Similar figures holding spears, in one case with two wolf-warriors, are found on Migration Period mounts from Gutenheim and Obrigheim in Germany (Sjöberg 1905; Paulsen 1967: 142; Arent 1969: 137f; Fig. 6.7). The visual theme, composition and motifs leave no doubt whatever that these artefacts are all part of the same tradition. The cultures in which they are found are also linked by a common belief in elite genealogical descent from Óðinn-Woden, and the material expression of this idea on the war-gear of their retinues. There may be much to be gained from an integration of existing studies of the role of Óðinn in the ideology and origin myths of the Germanic tribes on the Continent (cf. Moisl 1981; Wolfram 1994; Hedeager 1996 & 1998; Romare 1997) and this kind of analysis of *seiðr* and its social functions.





Fig. 6.8 The runestone from Istaby (Dr359), Mjällby parish, Blekinge, recording three generations of lychophoric names (photo by Bengt Lundberg, Swedish National Heritage Board, Creative Commons).

Even familiar objects like these can still yield wholly new data. The Torslunda image has long been studied in relation to the cult of Óðinn, but the die has now been subjected to laser scanning at the Archaeological Research Laboratory in Stockholm, which has shown that the right eye of the dancer not only really is missing (thus strengthening his identification as Óðinn), but even more interestingly that the eye was originally present but *during the process of making the mould* it was removed using a sharp instrument – an action which surely must have been significant in some way, and which gives an intriguing insight into the ritual overtones in the process by which objects such as helmets were made (Arrhenius and Freij 1992; see Price & Mortimer 2014 for more on this theme).





Fig. 6.9 Runestone from Källby, Källbyås, Västergötland (Vg 56), with an image that may represent a berserkr wearing an animal skin (photo by Magnus Källström, used by kind permission).

Another object from the same period on the cusp of the Viking Age perhaps gives us a glimpse of what these wolf-men meant in practice. The seventh-century runestone from Istaby in Mjällby parish, Blekinge (DR 359) lists three generations of men in the same family, all of whom have lycophoric names combining battle terms with a wolf element (Krause 1966: 204ff; Jansson 1987: 19–24; Düwel 2001: 42ff; see especially the extensive study by Sundqvist & Hultgård 2004, with references to other Blekinge stones which mention some of the same men; Fig. 6.8). Perhaps these names imply some form of totemic animal running in a family:

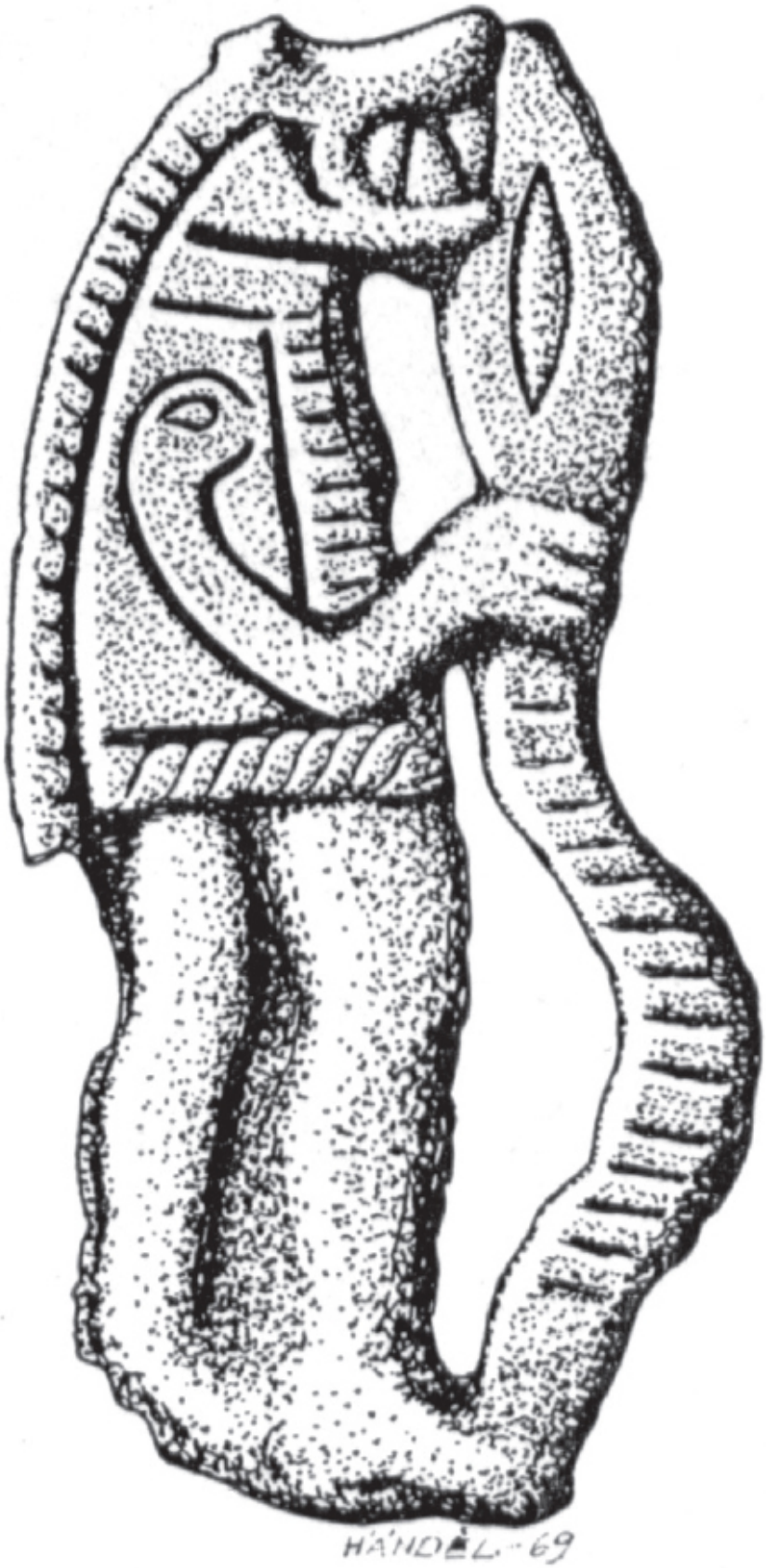

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Fig. 6.10 The cast bronze human figure from grave 6, gravefield 4 at Ekhammar, Kungsängen parish, Uppland: a possible depiction of a berserkr*? (after Ringquist 1969: 289; drawing by B. Händel).*

hAÞuwulafR hAeruwulafiR
AfatR hAriwulafa warAit runaR ÞAiAR

Haþuwulfr [Battle-Wolf], son of Heruwulfr [Sword-Wolf], cut these runes in memory of Hæriulfr [War-Host-Wolf]

Some runic monuments of the Viking Age actually depict figures who may be identified with *berserkir*. One such is the runestone from Källby at Källbyås, Västergötland (Vg 56), with an image that may represent a warrior wearing an animal skin (cf. Jansson 1987: 119; Fig. 6.9). The design clearly shows drooping ears and some kind of suit that comes down to the man's wrists and knees. The absence of a neckline implies that what is shown is a complete skin rather than a pelt and mask.

A warrior apparently wearing some kind of skin is also depicted on the Oseberg tapestry, holding a shield and spear (Hougen 1940: 104). A similar image, though more clearly involving animal symbolism, is found on a small human figure cast in bronze, found in a Viking-Age cremation grave at Ekhammar south of Stockholm (Ringquist 1969; Fig. 6.10). The figure appears to be wearing a waist-length tunic of some kind, with an animal-head? mask that seems to resemble a dog or wolf. The teeth are very clearly shown. A kind of border runs down the back of the figure's head and continues to its waist, similar to that shown on the 'boar-woman' figure from the Oseberg tapestry discussed above in relation to *valkyrjur*. Perhaps the Ekhammer figure represents a man in a boar costume? The figure appears to be naked from the waist down, though the 'tunic' covers the genital area.

The masks from Hedeby harbour have already been discussed in chapter 3, but we can bring them to mind again in the present context. To this we can add the presence of bearskins in graves, spread out either under or over the deceased and detectable archaeologically in the form of claws and paw-bones. Bo Petré (1980) has collected a complete corpus of these burials from the whole of the Iron Age and notes that the custom is found in both male and female graves. In his paper Petré interprets this aspect of mortuary ritual as a

reflection of the importance of the fur trade, but this conclusion has been challenged by Åke V. Ström (1980) who argues for a connection with the *berserkir* and Óðinn (see also Nockert 1991: 106f for notes on Viking-Age furs in the same context). The question is unresolved, but the very strong symbolic aspects of bears in the Viking thought-world would surely suggest that these burials must have possessed other dimensions beyond the merely economic.

Finally, the stereotypical *berserkir* of the sagas have also left their mark in material culture, in the form of some of the rooks in the late twelfth-century chess sets found on the Isle of Lewis (M. Taylor 1978 and references therein). These armoured figures are shown biting their shields with prominent teeth and a crazed expression, and are clearly related to the formulaic descriptions of the *berserkr*-rage (Price 2014c).

It is difficult to take the written descriptions and archaeological finds much further, but some suggestions can be made. Was there a difference between the wolf-warriors and the bear-men? The texts suggest that there was. One clue to this lies in the combination of wolf-imagery and the poetic attributes of *ulfheðnar*. Wolves are light, fast creatures who move in packs; this sounds similar to the *ulfheðnar* from the skaldic verses, armed with spears and fighting in formations. Perhaps they were light skirmishers, similar to the *velites* of the Roman republic, who interestingly also wore wolfskins and carried spears. Perhaps the *berserkir* were heavier shock troops, used to break enemy ranks through the ferocity of their assault; again, this matches the written descriptions.

Another approach takes account of the evident relationship between animal-warriors, shape-changing and the idea of ritual dramas, as seen in the Byzantine *jul* story. There are distant echoes of such performances that may also be of relevance to the Viking Age, one of which is the famous horn dance from Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire, England (Alford 1933). Originally performed at Christmas time (Hutton 1996: 90) and in most respects similar to the widespread tradition of Midlands Hobby-Horse dances, the Abbots Bromley version has the unique addition of several sets of antlers. These are now mounted on carved wooden deer-heads on poles but, according to Plot's description from 1686, were once worn by the dancers themselves (Plot 1686: 434). The present relevance of this custom comes from the antlers, which are from reindeer – a long-since extinct species in Britain – and have been

radiocarbon dated to the eleventh century (Buckland 1980; Zachrisson 2001). The antlers derive from domesticated, castrated deer, and were presumably imported from Scandinavia sometime between *c.*1000 and the seventeenth century when the dance is first described. We know that the form of the dance has changed many times over even recent centuries so a closer study of the custom can give us little information about its origins, but it is not impossible – likely, even – that it ultimately derives from some kind of late Viking-Age ritual drama of the kind described.

Ritual disguise and shamanic armies

In addition to the material described above, there are a number of early medieval written sources from outside Scandinavia which discuss animal skins in a religious or ritual context. These take the form of a series of denunciations penned by church officials against the practices they witnessed at the popular midwinter festivals that were performed all over Europe between the fourth to eleventh centuries (a format similar to Archbishop Wulfstan's *Sermo lupi ad anglos* discussed above) and warning the populace against a return to pagan customs. The majority of the texts come from Italy, but examples are also known from France, Germany, Spain, Greece and North Africa. After extensive research, a complete corpus of these denunciations was compiled by Edmund Chambers in the early years of this century, and published as appendix N in his monumental work on early drama, *The Mediaeval stage* (1903).

The denunciations are often formulaic, and some examples may well have been essentially copies of a few core directives issued by the church (Hutton 1996: 89). The texts rarely include detail, but a frequent motif concerns the wearing of animal skins. These usually appear in the form of the head and hide being worn by an individual, although there are examples which tend to suggest more a kind of model animal being carried, perhaps in a similar fashion to the carnival figures found in later medieval urban and rural festivities (see below). Various animals are named, but the majority of denunciations mention either stags or, to a lesser extent, bulls. Among the strongest condemnations of the wearing of skins appears in the additions made by the anonymous ninth-century copyist of the Penitential of Theodore of Tarsus, the original of which (minus the references to animal skins) dated to the late seventh century (Haddan & Stubbes 1871: iii, 189f).

Given their geographical context outside the Viking world, at least for the most part, it is hard to immediately fit these descriptions of animal skin dances into the pattern of Scandinavian custom suggested above. However, this evidence for the wearing of skins at such an early date and in a ritual context *is* important here, especially in combination with a second category of mask or image mentioned in the same context as the animal skins in the church directives. Alongside the condemnation of skin-wearing we several times find invective against the custom of 'making the old woman'. Hutton (1996: 89)

identifies this with the female effigy representing winter and death, as found until the nineteenth century in Mediterranean and Balkan Europe, but also notes the sometimes explicit element of ritual transvestism present in the descriptions.

In reviewing the animal-head customs of post-medieval and early modern times as possible remnants of early medieval archetypes, we are at once confronted with the most basic of research problems: how old are these traditions, what did they signify, and is there any meaningful connection between them going back to earlier forms of ritual drama? Ronald Hutton, one of the most sceptical of folklorists, has recently reviewed the entire range of these customs in Britain, casting an extremely critical eye over the treatment that they have received at the hands of successive generations of scholars (Hutton 1994, 1996). Until the 1970s, folklore studies tended to view these customs as essentially rural phenomena, unchanged throughout their history and deriving from pre-Christian religious practices which could in part be reconstructed from them, despite the fact that this was expressed in terms of "an almost wholly amorphous past" (Hutton 1996: vii). Deriving from the works of Wright, Taylor, Gomme and Frazer among others, these views remained unchallenged in the specific field of folklore studies, and unaffected by developments in approaches to, for example, historical and anthropological research. In the late 1970s and 1980s, this view began to be increasingly questioned, and the seasonal customs were argued to be products at least as much of industrial urban environments as of the countryside, and as having been continually adapted over time (see Hutton 1996 for an elegant review of this reversal in opinion). The crucial question of the customs' antiquity was not denied, but more effort was made to assess individual activities in the light of historical evidence for ancient religion, rather than merely assumption or supposition (cf. Hutton 1991).

If we examine this with specific reference to the animal-heads, the interpretation of these customs as remnants of prehistoric animal cults goes back at least to the early twentieth century (Addy 1907), reaching its most developed form in the work of Violet Alford, who argued that all such rituals – especially the Hobby-Horse – represented a pre-Christian belief in animals as symbols of the soil's fertility, celebrated through winter dramas while the earth slept (Alford 1939, 1968). Greater caution began to be exercised by

scholars such as Cawte in his comprehensive study of *Ritual animal disguise* (1978), a principle followed more recently by Hutton (1996: ch. 8) and the authors in Gunnell's 2007 edited collection.

There is one such animal head custom in the west which is both of probable early date and also linked to Scandinavia – the *Laare Vane* or 'White Mare' of the Isle of Man. This was a white-painted wooden horse's head, held by a man covered by a white sheet, and was "brought into the communal room of a household after supper on New Year's Eve" (Hutton 1996: 84). Several men including a fiddler accompanied the *Laare*, which would chase the women of the household until it caught one, after which she would wear the horse's costume herself and then remain seated while the *Laare*'s company performed a complex dance with staves. As the dance ended, the fiddler was blindfolded and subjected to a mock beheading, after which his head was laid in the lap of the woman masked as the *Laare Vane*. The fiddler's 'head' was then compelled to answer questions about the nature of the coming year. In addition to its appearance at the end of the year, the *Laare* was also brought out for harvest festivities.

Although the *Laare Vane* was recorded as late as the nineteenth century, even Hutton is satisfied that the ritual is of ancient origin (1996: 84f). However, while clearly of considerable antiquity its Scandinavian associations are not without problems and it may be that the Manx *Laare* derives more from the Celtic tradition than the Scandinavian, a suggestion reinforced by the role of the 'severed' head – of the fiddler, in this case – which frequently recurs in Celtic mythology and especially in the context of prophecy (though see Ellis Davidson 1989 for alternative views, and we should also remember Óðinn's interrogation of Mímr's head). In support of the 'Celtic' view there are close parallels from neighbouring areas, such as the similarly-named *Lair Bhān* of southern and eastern Ireland which appeared at Christmas time (Hutton 1996: 85; Cawte 1978: 153–6) and the various forms of the south Welsh *Mari Lwyd* or 'Grey Mare'. Unlike the *Laare*, the head of the *Mari Lwyd* was actually a horse's skull mounted on a pole, draped with a white sheet under which its carrier was concealed; some modern versions of the *Mari* are further decorated with inset glass eyes and a clacking jaw (Hutton 1996: 83f). It is also known in Carmarthenshire by the alternative name of *Y Pen Ceffyl*, 'the Horse's Head', and in West Glamorgan as *Aderyn bec y llwyd*,

‘the Grey-Beaked Bird’ (Owen 1978: 49–55). The custom still flourishes and in the 1990s several village *Maris* were in fact revived after a period of disuse.

It is precisely these kinds of ritual dramas involving masks and furs that have been considered by Terry Gunnell in his 1995 thesis (see especially pp. 24–36), and his comparisons with later medieval and post-medieval folk customs must be taken seriously. He has also examined much of the archaeological evidence reviewed above, and come independently to the same conclusions about its relevance to the *berserkir*. All of this material thus provides yet another anchor that ties the complex of animal-warriors to a genuine Viking-Age past of ritual dramas, shape-changing sorcery and battle-magic.

Just as with the circumpolar shamanic parallels for the Norse sorcerers that we saw in chapter 5, there are also other European cultures that exhibit a similar pattern of ‘totemic’ warfare in connection with belief systems of this kind.

One of these was studied by Carlo Ginzburg and published in his book on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witchcraft (1983 [1966]), focusing on the community of the Friuli in Italy. Analysing unusually full investigation records of the Inquisition, Ginzburg uncovered a strange series of agrarian cult practices that has many parallels with what I have argued above to be the ritual war in Scandinavia, and with the shape-changing warriors that fought in it. In the case of the Friuli, there seem to have been whole communities of sorcerers that, in their spirit forms, also formed military fraternities.

Known as the *benandanti*, the ‘good walkers’, these individuals would gather in their villages at certain times of the year and collectively enter trance, projecting their souls into the other world. What is interesting here is not only that they believed their spirits to take animal form – in this case that of mice – but that in this shape they made up an army of supernatural soldiers, complete with miniature spirit-uniforms, standards and weapons. The purpose of this force was to journey down to Hell in order to fight with a second army similarly composed of souls, though these belonged to evil sorcerers or witches. The resulting battle was fought for the prize of the coming harvest, the growth of the corn being decided in a supernatural, silent war taking place in another world.

The discovery of this military organisation of witches good and bad – all of whom also considered themselves as Christians! – opened up a hitherto unsuspected landscape of shamanic cults lasting long into the post-medieval period. This can unfortunately only be covered in summary here, but the work that has developed from this by Ginzburg and others has changed our view of European popular religion.

Comparable research has been undertaken in Hungary and the former Yugoslavia on individuals called *kresniki*, who seem to have been almost identical to the Italian *benandanti*. Acquiring their power from having been born with a caul, they sent out their souls at night in the form of dogs or horses, while their bodies slept. Again, the purpose was to collectively fight witches (*strigas*), here in duels with staves (Bošković-Stulli 1960; Klaniczay 1987, 1990: 134–7). In other parts of Istria the witches whom the *kresniki* fought were called *kudlaks* – every clan had a *kresnik* who did good and a *kudlak* who did evil. The two sorcerer-types fought each other in the form of goats, and were also conceptualised in terms of colours – the *kresniki* being white and the *kudlaks* being black (Klaniczay 1990: 134). Similar patterns have been found among the *táltos* ritual specialists of Hungarian belief and the *nestinari* of Bulgaria, again with ‘military’ combat in trance and animal-form between opposing classes of sorcerers. These battles could be seen by those with second sight, as the sorcerers ‘fought in the skies’, and some of these individuals also possessed the power to heal (see Klaniczay 1990: 137f for references to the very large body of work on these figures). In all these conceptions there are clearly very close parallels with the Siberian shamans, and with the Viking sorcerers.

An even closer match for the Norse *berserkir*, both structurally and geographically, comes from werewolf beliefs recorded in seventeenth-century Lithuania (Ginzburg 1983: 28–32). Here there were records of military brotherhoods called *Wahrwolf* societies, who on several occasions a year would transform into wolves and, once again, journey collectively to the world of the dead to fight witches for possession of the seed grain. Their weapons were iron staffs – of obvious interest in the present context – and whips. Their sense of fraternity was very strong, expressed as a kind of martial cohesion, and the whole complex of werewolf identity was bound together by the notion that they were the servants of a divinity (one of their names for

themselves translates as ‘the Hounds of God’). This community of werewolves clearly thought of itself as something very, very old.

Lycanthropic beliefs in werewolves are of obvious relevance for the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, but we can no more than scratch the surface here. Traditions of these creatures are found in the later medieval descriptions of Scandinavia compiled by Olaus Magnus, and there is a rich corpus of material in medieval and later folklore. The primary work in this field for Scandinavia is Ella Odstedt’s 1943 thesis on the werewolf in Swedish folk tradition, while important contributions have also been made by Lid (1937) and Pluskowski (2006) who similarly take up the Viking animal-warriors in this context. All the documentary sources for werewolf beliefs are summarised and analysed here, considered by regional variation and typology. Odstedt reveals fascinating patterns of werewolf stories which also exhibit regional variation that is not unconnected to Viking-Age conditions, despite the chronological gulf between this and the late medieval traditions. One set of beliefs concerns those who acquire this condition through sorcery or a curse, a pattern that spreads across central Sweden and covers Svealand and Götaland. In the south, the area that was Danish in the Viking period, people were thought to have become werewolves through certain conditions at birth, such as being born with a caul; these beliefs are often combined with those of the *mara*, the Nightmare. A third group of werewolf legends concerns those who became such through their own decision. This is confined to inner Norrland and essentially to Sápmi, where the various forms of sorcery required for such a transformation included crawling through the opening of a buckled belt, and wearing a bearskin. Odstedt’s work includes excellent references for further study.

In his book *Ecstasies: deciphering the witches’ sabbath*, one of the pieces that eventually grew out of work on the shamanic armies of the Friuli fighting for their harvests, Ginzburg proposes a double scheme of cross-cultural associations, based on a state of being and the physical attributes associated •with it (1990: 265): *benandanti* or *kresniki* (as archetypes)/werewolves/ •shamans/the dead the amniotic rag or caul/animal skins/a mantle, cap or veil that hides the face As a constant theme in these militaristic transformations he isolates the idea of things belonging either to the world of the dead or the

world of the non-born, what he calls “an ambiguous, borderline object that marks borderline figures” (*ibid*).

As we have seen, these patterns fit the model for the Norse ecstatic warriors, and is also compatible with all that we have seen before on other aspects of the *seiðr* complex. Ginzburg’s further development of the idea of shamanic military traditions coupled with other aspects of ecstatic sorcery is too long to be taken up in its entirety here (1990, especially pp. 153–294). However, it forms a usefully updated complement to Höfler’s early work, and must be required reading for anyone interested in the ‘totemic’ warrior cults of the early North.

Ecstasy, psychic dislocation and the dynamics of mass violence

Battle is rarely a matter of practical necessity alone, and the decision to make war can in many ways be seen as a moral conflict. Its study is therefore necessarily social and psychological. However, the dynamics of mass violence have been surprisingly little explored in relation to the highly warlike societies that characterise much of the Iron Age in north-western Europe. Such conflict studies are of particular relevance to the Viking Age, a period whose very existence has long been defined by the activities of fighting forces supporting themselves by means of a life of itinerant violence. Warfare can naturally also function as a social regulator, and in the discussions presented here its ritualised elements need in no way have detracted from the brutal effectiveness of the Viking war machine, and its efficiency as a means of gaining renewable wealth.

This is not the place for a detailed appraisal of the anthropology of war and its analysis through archaeological material. A great deal of work has been undertaken on this over the last decade, with the emergence of battlefield archaeology into the mainstream of the discipline (*e.g.* Carman 1997; Freeman & Pollard 2001) and major re-evaluations of entire cultures based on their attitudes to violence (the American Southwest is a good example here – see Lekson 1999 and references therein). However, in the context of the ‘totemic’ warriors examined above and the ritual overtones of battle, we can briefly focus on selected aspects of conflict studies. The most important of these concerns the psychological aspects of combat.

Unsurprisingly, much of the impetus for research in this area naturally arose from the world wars of the twentieth century. It is significant that the serious perception of these conditions to a large degree ultimately derived from artistic representations. With earlier prototypes in the publications of writers such as Tolstoy and Crane, this is above all typified by the work of Hemingway, whose semi-autobiographical fiction contains extensive insights into the "psychic dislocation in battle" (Meyers 1985: 572) that he had himself undergone. It should be stressed that this is far removed from the compassionate writings of authors like Remarque, and even – however grim – the pastoral evocations of Owen, Brooke and the other Allied war poets. With the possible exception of Sassoon, none of these latter writers admitted either the worrying adrenalin rush of unleashed violence or the feelings of sensory displacement which we now recognise as uncomfortably commonplace in combat narratives. This laid the foundations for the exploration not just of aggression and death in their raw forms but also of the social constructs of courage, honour, cowardice and duty with which these are surrounded in war. Linked to this are also the changing perceptions of what was once known as 'shell-shock' and later 'battle fatigue', and are today understood to be post-traumatic stress disorders.

All these studies naturally group into those written from personal experience of combat, and those produced as works of theoretical insight. In terms of the general development of aggression analysis, we may observe here that the latter category of writing has in many ways emerged from the former.

Perhaps most important in this respect are the works of Ernst Jünger, whose *In Stahlgewittern* ('Storm of steel', 1920) and its successor *Der Kampf als inneres Erleibnis* ('Battle as inner experience', 1922) stemmed from years of astonishingly brutal combat in the trenches. Jünger's curious aesthetic and anaesthetised appreciation of war, and his belief in humankind's "elementary instinct to kill", predict much of Lorenz's work on the nature of aggression and are fundamental to studies of the moral and psychological dimensions of conflict. Jünger fought in both world wars and was an indifferent Nazi, a soldier-aristocrat whose belief in total warfare had little to do with ideological conviction but was instead coupled with a deliberate and cultivated amorality similar to that of Huysmans – indeed, he was depressed by what he saw as a crucial insight into the human condition. His diaries from the Blitzkrieg

offensive in western Europe record what he witnessed with a cold and detached eye, and he took an almost anthropological interest in describing the clinical details of men in combat. Even beyond the battlefield itself, his work is full of unsettling images of aggression in a broader context, such as his observation that during the sack of towns the first objects destroyed by the pillaging soldiers were musical instruments, and the only items left untouched, always, were the mirrors.

Like Lorenz, Jünger was essentially interested in animals rather than people – Lorenz's passion was birds, while Jünger's was insects and especially beetles; it was to their patterns of instinctive aggression that they both compared the human behaviour that they had seen at first hand.

Both men's work was taken up by others and employed in the propagation of Nazi ideology. This was more active in the case of Jünger, whose combat memoirs of the First World War were reprinted in the early years of the Nazi offensive to serve as inspirational literature (*Storm of Steel* had gone through no less than twenty editions by 1940). Although he had published a paper on racial biology in 1942, Lorenz's work acquired its ideological resonances first after the war, when it was claimed that he was attempting to provide scientific 'proof' of the triumph of the Aryan will as an inevitable expression of natural selection. Although primarily concerned with the cognitive ethology of animals, which forms the subject of the very great majority of his published work, Lorenz was also interested in the behaviour of human beings under stress, and especially in war. He had seen action as an orderly with the German forces on the Russian Front, in an experience which led to his controversial observations on what he saw as the primal human fighting reflex, his famously termed 'militant fighting enthusiasm'. By this he meant a genetically-encoded pattern of aggressive behaviour, triggered by circumstance and as natural a part of human beings as similar displays among animals. In this reflex he claimed to identify a series of factors that were already familiar from his ethological studies of animals, and which could be universally applied to human beings in states of extreme aggressive arousal, especially in hand-to-hand combat (Lorenz 1967: 232).

This 'fixed motor pattern', as he also called it, was particularly connected with posture, including such features as a stiffened carriage or semi-crouched attitude, inwardly rotated arms leaving the elbows in a prominent position,

locked facial muscles forming what Lorenz termed the ‘hero face’ (1967: 232), bared teeth and a hunched neck which he compared to the raised hackles of dogs or wolves. However, rather than simply suggesting that humans may have a ‘natural’ way of fighting just as is found in most species of animals, Lorenz went on to imply that the very impetus for war, and the details of its conduct, were also an inescapable part of this natural pattern of aggression: “men may enjoy the feeling of absolute righteousness even when they commit atrocities” (Lorenz 1967: 232).

As we have seen in chapter 2, his publication of these theories in 1963 as *Das sogenannte Böse,* ‘The So-Called Evil’, immediately produced accusations of Nazi sympathies. At face value, Lorenz’s ideas seemed to shift responsibility for acts of violence, oppression and conquest from a moral to a biological plane. The use of force against fellow human beings, he seemed to be arguing, was in a way an expression of Darwinistic selection. We should remember that this was published only 18 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, and its nightmares were still fresh in the minds of a world struggling to come to terms with the Holocaust and its implications. The academic community was appalled at Lorenz’s suggestions, and rejected the scientific credence that he appeared to be proposing for such doctrines as manifest destiny and white supremacy.

Lorenz was in turn dismayed by the interpretation of his work, especially as in the closing chapters he had tried to head off in advance exactly the criticisms that had been made (the book appeared in English in 1967 under the more sensibly cautious title *On Aggression*). The fact that he had made a great number of very specific statements of his political views – including an explicit rejection of fascism – and also condemned anti-semitism, racism and other prejudicial viewpoints throughout the text was ignored in favour of out-of-context vilification of selected citations. However, he was certainly naive in the phrasing of some of his more controversial points, and his protestations in no way prevented others from taking up, extending and distorting his ideas for more overt political ends.

The work of Jünger and Lorenz is equally flawed, though in different ways, and it may simply be that both men were irretrievably scarred by the events which they sought to make sense of in their writings. In the post-Vietnam era the suggestion that under certain circumstances ordinary people

are capable of committing acts of extreme brutality does not seem strange to us, but in the early sixties such a notion was difficult to countenance: Lorenz himself predicted that in the very near future his observations would seem obvious and even banal (1967: 237).

Lorenz was especially interested in the rational control of instinctive behaviour, in other words the mechanisms by which his 'fixed motor pattern' could be harnessed for political or moral ends. An aspect of his work that was almost completely ignored by his critics both at the time of publication and subsequently, this element of Lorenz's studies was essentially a search for the social origins and context of war. He felt able to isolate a number of factors which were essential pre-requisites for the "full eliciting of militant •enthusiasm" (Lorenz 1967: 234f): knowledge of the stimulus situation that •releases the aggression the presence, concrete or abstract, of a 'hateful enemy' which emanates a threat to the 'values' underpinning the above • •knowledge the existence of inspiring leader figure(s) the presence of many individuals all animated by the same emotion As he put it, "None of [our emotional allegiances] can ever have such devastating effects as unbridled militant enthusiasm when it infects great masses and overrides all other considerations by its single-mindedness and specious nobility" (Lorenz 1967: 236). Lorenz's anthropological observations of humans in battle remain valid, but the adoption of a 'natural' posture for fighting by no means necessarily implies that the *act* of aggression itself is anything other than socially-engineered. All of this work has obvious resonances for the fighting rage of the *berserkir* and its relationship to its surrounding social-political structure, in the important realisation that this behaviour was not only understood but actively cultivated, sought after and harnessed.

Homeric lyssa and holy rage

The concept of a special kind of fighting rage has been observed again and again in different circumstances. We can briefly consider a few examples, and then analyse the ritual battlefield experiences of the *berserkir* in this light.

At one level there is a kind of collective frenzy, a general alteration of perception that can affect entire battlefields, spreading from man to man, especially under conditions of the most extreme stress. One such occasion was the Battle of Antietam in 1862, the worst single engagement of the Civil War and even now still the bloodiest day in American history, when more lives

were lost in a shorter space of time than in any other conflict including the world wars. Here is a Union soldier writing candidly of what it was like to advance into the Confederate fire:

The truth is … the consuming passion in the breast of the average man is to get out of the way. Between the physical fear of going forward and the moral fear of turning back, there is a predicament of exceptional awkwardness. … The mental strain was so great that I saw at that moment the singular effect mentioned, I think, in the life of Goethe on a similar occasion – the whole landscape for an instant turned slightly red.

Anonymous Federal trooper quoted in McPherson 1990: 540

This moment of 'red-sky madness' was mentioned in many such descriptions, and how the stress instilled in the soldiers a kind of 'superadrenalised fury', as they fought 'shouting and laughing hysterically' (according to another Union officer, again quoted in McPherson 1990: 540).

The effect is cross-cultural, and can be seen in completely different contexts such as the experiences of Zulu warriors going into combat against the British a few years later. For the Zulus too the fighting rage could be described as 'seeing nothing but blood' or 'nothing but red', a process whereby the eyes turned 'dark' before the warriors could calm down and 'the light got into [their] eyes again' (Knight 1995: 221). There are descriptions of men seeing the battlefield through a sort of tunnel, a moving vortex of shapes advancing and receding from vision. Some of the Zulus hallucinated, with images that played on what they saw in front of them. This applied especially to the white soldiers' long beards, and post-battle accounts describe how they thought that they had been fighting giant dogs or monkeys. Told by their commanders to kill anything wearing clothes (the Zulus fought almost naked), a measure of the warriors' frenzy can be understood from the fact that several of them were seen repeatedly stabbing sacks of mealie and grain, apparently under the impression that these were human opponents (*ibid*: 222).

In this context we can also perceive a major element of ritual, beginning with the extensive pre-campaign preparations in which the warriors were purified from supernatural contamination in a long series of ceremonies (Knight 1995: 160–3, 170ff). The Zulus' pre-battle rituals included the taking of snuff which may have included a variety of cannabis that produces an edgy,

nervous state of mind. The use of drugs is important here, as of course this has also been intermittently proposed in connection with the Viking *berserkir* (cf. Fabing 1956).

The Battle of Isandlwana on 22nd January 1879, from which many of the above examples are taken, was fought during a partial eclipse of the sun which turned the light eerily red. This coincided with a specially sacred, and specially feared, period of time that the Zulus called *umnyama*, a dangerous moment when the forces of chaos have access from their world to this one. It is very clear that some of the Zulu warriors experienced the battle as actually taking place in an intermediate realm of nightmare, in a quite literal sense, as the fighting men moved across the boundaries of reality in a dark swirl of violence.

In both these examples, from the Union soldiers of the Civil War and the Zulu warriors of 1879, we see the same emphasis on red and a clouding of the vision. Perhaps we should recall here the *Haraldskvæði* of Þórbjorn hornklofi, and his description of the *ulfheðnar*. The image of reddened spears is common in skaldic verse, but that of painting their shields with blood, and even drinking it, is not. We should remember too the bloody loom of the *valkyrjur* and the red rains that are described as washing across the sky.

We can take this back further in time, and identify the same pattern of behaviour in ancient societies, though then it was understood differently. The Greeks of Homer’s time had a clear understanding of the different kinds of psychological motors that they saw as relevant in violent situations, distinguishing between two sharply-defined states of mind. On the one hand was the concept of *menos*, a kind of clear-headed decisiveness characterised by a coldly ruthless and methodical way of fighting. A prime example of this comes from the *Odyssey*, in the manner in which Odysseus, on his return home from his long journey, stands his ground and calmly shoots down his wife’s suitors one by one. Contrasted to this was *lyssa*, or ‘wolf rage’, a state of ecstatic possession which took hold of a warrior in combat (cf. Lincoln 1991: ch. 10).

This concept of sacred anger is important. The connections between the berserk fighting rage and the more modern experiences outlined above will have become obvious (think of Sviatoslav of Kiev terrifying the Byzantines with his howling frenzy), but to this we must add a concept of battle as a

consciously ritual, even holy, act. In this respect the historical descriptions of the berserk fury of the Vikings can perhaps be best likened to the ecstatic frenzies of the followers of Dionysus whose activities are so vividly described by Euripedes, and which provide an extraordinary window on the ancient psychology of mass violence.

The Messengers' speeches from *The Bacchae* (written *c.*406 BC) contain the fullest surviving description of the bacchic frenzy associated with the worship of Dionysus, in which we perhaps see a grim precursor of the Viking battle fury. In summary, a large group of worshippers gather in the open air and begin singing and dancing quietly, after eating a ritual meal. As the dancing progresses, each worshipper feels the first stimulus of the divine, and as the shock hits them their excitement increases. They begin running, feeling themselves endowed with enormous physical strength, released from everyday inhibitions and disposed towards violence. As they further merge with the larger life of the animal world, they begin to act towards other species according to the laws of nature, *i.e.* with murderous ferocity. In the case of the Maenads, they hunt goats and cattle, tearing them to pieces and feasting on raw flesh. When the ecstasy has passed, the worshippers return peacefully to normal society (Euripedes, *Bacchae*: 677–774, 1024–1152; cf. Vellacott 1973: 32f).

In the three centuries following the defeat of the Persian invasion, the Athenians had tried to order their society along the principle of reason, replacing autocratic power with democracy and the vote. These changes had also brought with them a generation of war, and many Greeks found the rule of reason to be an anxious one, with a degree of social organisation considerably more restrictive than had earlier been the case. Dionysus was a late addition to the pantheon of Greek gods, accepted as the son of Zeus; he was primarily a spirit of life, its production and liberation. His cult provided a new outlet for the tensions afflicting Greek society, a safety-valve within a social order becoming increasingly stratified and bound by legal codes of regulated behaviour. The rituals of Bacchus allowed their participants to temporarily return to a life of the mind and spirit, in unity with the natural world (see Dodds 1951: 64–178 for a fuller analysis).

We should think about this in relation to the massive social transformations that occurred in Scandinavia throughout the Iron Age as a

whole. In relation to this, Vellacott's summary of the trappings of the Dionysiac cult is worth quoting in full, for the comparisons they bear to the reconstruction of Óðinn worship within the Viking warrior groups:

One of his [Dionysus'] most obvious and popular gifts was that of wine […] music, dancing and above all the excitement of group emotion, of worshipping in a company distinguished by dress, secret rites and a consciousness of power residing in mass-surrender to the supernatural – these were all means by which this cult attracted […] the Greek who for one reason or another found the demands and restrictions of civilised life profitless and irksome.

Vellacott 1973: 31f

There may be an interesting parallel here with the medieval concept of 'Misrule', which functioned within the framework of folk tradition as a legitimation of festive licence and formalised misbehaviour (see the discussion by Hutton 1996: ch. 9). We see the same presence of temporarily permissible sexual dispropriety, drinking and abandon, employed in a similar fashion as both a pressure valve for the aggressive tensions within the community and a bond of social cohesion.

The comparisons between the cult of Dionysus, Misrule and the possible Óðinn-related frenzies of the Viking *berserkir* should obviously not be stretched too far, and there is of course no suggestion of a Viking bacchic cult. However, it is certainly possible and consistent with the available evidence that similar elements may have arisen within the cult of Óðinn in the context of the changing ideologies of later Iron Age society in the North.

It may be that the Vikings recognised in certain animals – particularly those of the battlefield (the wolf and the raven), the forest (the bear), and the sea (the seal) – the same combined potential of divinity and supernatural power that the Greeks saw as residing in beasts. It is not difficult to understand how the Viking shape-changers' perceived unity with the animal world could have led to a temporary abandonment to what they saw as a more instinctive side of their natures, a sensual experience separate from the desire or ability to analyse it. Such abandonment, perhaps a kind of ecstatic state, may be the reality behind the descriptions of *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar.*

Something akin to this has been recognised by folklore scholars such as Cawte and Hutton in relation to the donning of animal skins or masks during

traditional dance and ritual drama; both researchers have actually participated in such festivities and have worn animal disguises. Cawte (1978: 218) has observed that “the experience of being inside a hooden horse has an odd character of its own, involving a slackening of personal responsibility for what occurs as the role of playing the creature takes over”, while Hutton (1996: 94) has similarly commented on the same phenomenon, focusing in particular on the quite genuine nervousness generated even in modern, tourist audiences by the approach of “something that is, and yet is not, a human being”. The unusual qualities of this experience may have increased over time the longer the mask or skin was worn, and we should remember that the medieval and later dances would often continue for an entire day and night with performances being repeated at every farm or hostelry along a processional route around the community.

Predators and prey in the legitimate war

We can also apply these ideas about animal transformation and rage at a broader scale. The de-humanisation of the enemy is a common element of collective aggression in many societies, in the present as in the past, and propaganda alleging ‘bestial’ atrocities has been a familiar element of war throughout the last century. Even in peacetime, violent criminals are often said to have behaved ‘like animals’. In characterising an opposing group in this way, an aggressor can thereby become a defender, justified in protecting lives and property by preemptively removing a wild, non-human threat. By the same process the ‘bestial’ enemy becomes a dangerous menace that it is only right and necessary to destroy.

It is this legitimisation of the act of war that seems to be reversed in the Viking warrior communities of Scandinavia, and in identifying with animals the Vikings covert *themselves* into predators, their enemies becoming their natural prey. It is also possible to read other levels of meaning into these beliefs, such as the appropriate nature of such a self-image for a highly mobile military agency, whose activities could thus be conceptualised as roaming widely over a feeding ground. In the context of ritual battle, the dedication of opponents to Óðinn mentioned above may also have served another function, for in several cultures the enemies slain in religious battles are in some respect an embodiment of the war-gods invoked before combat. For the predatory Viking animal-warriors, the deaths of such foes may have represented their

ritual consumption and thus the passage of the god into his worshippers. In surrendering to the ‘bestial’ side of their natures, the *berserkir* may have conceptualised these acts of war as a form of self-sacrifice, a further offering to Óðinn.

Very few cultures are known to de-humanise their own aggression, such behaviour being found in a developed form among a handful of Native American peoples from both the north and south of the continent. These include the Aztec Eagle- and Jaguar-warriors (Townsend 1992: 203–10; Słupecki 1994: 166–70), and some of the fighting fraternities of the Plains such as the Dog Soldiers of the Cheyennes (Mails 1973; Schlesier 1987; Afton *et al.* 2000). In some Native American societies, shamans combine their roles as sorcerers, warriors and shape-changers (Fig. 6.11).



Fig. 6.11 A Native American Blackfoot 'medicine man' or shaman with drum, bearskin, spear-staff and costume of hanging animal skins, painted by George Catlin in 1832 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Creative Commons).

In more conventional cases where a foe is dehumanised, it is the entire enemy people that are reduced to an animalistic level. This is not necessarily a permanent perception or characterisation, but one which is projected, and may

be modified or even reversed over time and in relation to political expediency. However, in the suggested case of the Vikings' self-dehumanisation it seems that this is firstly confined to one element in society (the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*) though in a form recognised by the whole social group, and secondly it may have been a temporary phenomenon becoming active in proximity to conflict. An alternative approach would be to define this as a permanent but latent aspect in the natures of those affiliated to such warrior societies. This attunes closely with the dual nature of shape-changers, as both human and animal.

Weaving war, grinding battle: *Darraðarljóð* and *Grottasongr* in context

From the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* and the ritual aspects of physical Viking warfare, we can briefly return to our previous subject of their ritual framework. The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how the war sorcery of the *seiðr*-performers and their kind provided a kind of supernatural empowerment of violence for the literal prosecution of battle, something which was itself bound up with magical practices and perceptions.

One of the most dramatic images of this that we have seen is the motif of weaving found in the poem *Darraðarljóð* discussed above. In this the determinance of fate – an attribute of the *nornir* – is combined with the combat intervention of the *valkyrjur* to ensure the outcome of a battle. This works at several levels. The loom of fate of the *nornir* parallels the fabric of death, dyed red, that the *valkyrjur* rip apart as they speed off to the battlefield. Each one takes a part of the cloth, a portion of the whole that they have helped to create. Not the least aspect of this design is that it clearly refers to women's work, the everyday chore of weaving transformed via a bloody loom made from human bodies (for further dimensions of this activity in the Iron Age thought-world, see Enright 1990). The theme is taken further by Karen Bek-Pedersen (2008, 2009), who emphasises that fate in the Old Norse mind was not belief, but fact; not the absence of choice, but the manifestation of a pre-existing truth. By embracing fate, an individual chose to become who they already were, and thus to reveal their essential self. The link to weaving is intricate, and intelligent, in that a woven textile always has a pattern from the beginning, inherent in its design, but this will not become fully apparent until

complete – an obvious parallel with life, gradually mapped out through experience. Similarly, the slow unveiling of a hidden truth is a very Óðinnic motif. One of the meanings of *Darraðr* or *Dorruðr* is ‘spear’, but it has also been suggested as an Óðinn name (Falk 1924); either way, the connection with the god is made.

These images are not unique to the poem, revealing that this was a more widespread understanding of reality, and that it extended further into Germanic culture (*e.g.* Hamilton 2007). The kenning of the spear-web is also found, for example, in strophe 5 of Egill’s *Hofuðlausn*. The weaving on the loom has similarly been claimed to parallel the darting movements of the *valkyrjur* as they go back and forth among the warriors fighting on the field (Simek 1993: 57). Even though I have proposed an alternative interpretation, we could also remember here the complex arrow-kenning of Þórarinn svarti in his tenth-century *Máhlíðingavísur* discussed in chapter 3. Meissner saw the kenning as depicting showers of arrows weaving through the sky of a battlefield, which he likened to the lilting melodies of a *seiðr* performance: if he was right, then this would fit perfectly with the motifs discussed here.

The motif of human heads as loomweights is also found in one other context, in chapter 7 of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, where it also occurs as a prophecy of violent doom. Here, Ingebjorg Óttarsdóttir dreams that she is weaving on a loom – interestingly producing a grey cloth, just as in *Darraðarljóð* – and then realises that the weights are in fact heads. One falls to the floor, and picking it up she recognises the face of Haraldr Gormsson.

From one female domain we can move to another, and find exactly the same kind of imagery employed. In the Eddic poem *Grottasongr* two Swedish girls are bought as slaves by the Danish king Fróði and set to work at grinding corn with the magic quernstone Grotti, which has the power to ‘grind out’ what ever future its user desires. Although Fróði believes that these are human women and therefore, in his estimation, no threat to him, it appears that they are in fact giantesses, and already well-familiar with the power of the quern:

Vér vetr nío vórom leikor, ǫflgar, alnar fyr iǫrð neðan; stóðo meyiar at meginverkom, foerðom siálfar setberg ór stað.

En vit síðan á Svíþióðo, framvísar tvær, í fólk stigom; beittom biǫrno, en brutom skiǫldo gengom í gǫgnom gráserkiat lið.

Nine winters we were playmates, mighty girls, nourished under the earth; the maids were doers of mighty deeds, we ourselves moved the flat-topped mountain from its place.

And afterwards in Sweden, we two prescient ones, we advanced against the army; we fought against bear-warriors, we broke shields, we marched against the grey-shirted army.

Grottasongr 11, 13; translation after Larrington 1996: 261 with my amendments

They describe how they have overthrown certain princes and supported others, and list many exploits in battle. In revenge for their captivity the two giantesses grind harder and harder, speaking all the while of a slaughter to come and the burning of Fróði's hall. As they grind on, the girls become warm at the same time as they speak of the future fire. Getting angrier and angrier, eventually they break the millstone at which point it is clear that Fróði's doom is sealed.

Grottasongr mines the same seams as *Darraðarljóð*: supernatural women, both beautiful and terrible, perform a woman's task with sorcerous overtones. The giantesses speak of *berserkir*, and they imply that they have the power to see (and determine) the future, like the *volur*. In both cases they create strife and killing through their completion of the task – the fabric is completed, the corn is ground. Even here there is a sexual overtone as we have seen so often before, as the first mention of the slave-girls' importance to Fróði is that they are for him *at mani hafðar*, 'to have at his pleasure' (*Grottasongr* 1). Strophe 8 implies that they are very beautiful. The wider meanings of *Grottasongr* have been illuminated by Clive Tolley (1995b: 67ff, and in his excellent 2008 edition), who compares it to the Finnish *sampo* cycle and the cosmic significance of the mill (see also Fendin 2006).

It is possible that another example can be found in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (80), in the dream foreboding disaster at Stamford Bridge, mentioned above. The trough held by the troll-woman could be full of blood like the one in *Víga-Glúms saga* 21, but it could equally refer to an object for kneading dough and making bread, of the kind found in several archaeological contexts like the Danish Viking-Age village of Vorbasse, where an example

was recovered from a well dendro-dated to 949 (Roesdahl & Wilson 1992: 243). The preparation of dough is not dissimilar to the grinding of corn in *Grottasongr*, and here too the context is the determination of doom in battle. One also recalls the staff standing vertically in a bucket in the Birka chamber grave Bj. 845, placed as in a churn, another possible layer of metaphor and reference.

The 'weapon dancers'

If there is one common thread that characterises the themes discussed in this book, it must be the degree of their interconnection. Time and again we have seen the networks of association between the 'natural' and 'supernatural' worlds and their inhabitants; the role of Óðinn as both sorcerer and war god; shape-changers, spirits and the soul; concepts of gender and sexuality; ideals of heroism and ideals of stoic resignation; and linking them all, the magical practices of women and the staff as a tool of power. In the societies of Viking-Age Scandinavia, all these factors combined to utterly erase the border between things that our modern terminologies can only separate – the 'religion' and 'war' of my first-edition title. It is therefore appropriate to close this chapter with a class of object that unites most of these disparate strands, the so-called 'weapon dancer' image that is found in northern Europe from the Migration period to the Viking Age (the latest corpus of these figures, with specific reference to war cults and the like, can be found in Helmbrecht 2008, 2011; see also Price & Mortimer 2014 for more on Óðinn symbolism).

The clearest of the Viking period examples comes from a woman's grave on Birka, Bj. 571, in the form of a silver pendant figurine 3 cm long (Arbman 1940: pl. 92; 1943: 185f; Fig. 6.12). The grave itself was unremarkable, a flat inhumation with simple grave-goods of sewing needles in a case, a comb, a knife and a whetstone, though the woman was clearly of some standing as the remains of some kind of shawl with embroidery of silver wire was found around her shoulders. Under a gilt-bronze circular brooch, placed as if hanging just below the chest, was the 'weapon dancer' pendant. In some ways it provides the classic archetype for these images – a male in a horned helmet with noseguard, wearing a long, belted coat decorated with punched circles, a sheathed sword in one hand and a straight object in the other. This latter may be a spear, though there is no sign that it ever had a recognisable head, or it

may be staff. The shaft of the ‘staff’ is divided into ten or eleven fields by small horizontal notches, the meaning of which is unknown.

Another very similar image was found in the form of a small, cast bronze figurine from a cremation grave at Ekhammar in central Sweden – the same burial that produced the bronze miniature ‘*berserkr*’ discussed above (Ringquist 1969; Fig. 6.13). In one hand this figure holds a sword, and in the other two objects crossed together to make an X shape. These appear far too small to be spears, and may be something else, such as staffs. They are undecorated, but there is a suggestion of a slight bulbousness at each end of the objects. As with the Birka example, the warrior has a horned helmet with birds’ heads on the terminals, and a belted tunic.

Two similar figures appear on tapestry fragments from the Oseberg ship burial. One of them is apparently playing a leading role in the procession that forms a main theme of the weave, while another is found adjacent to the armed man wearing what appears to be an animal skin (Hougen 1940: 92ff; Gunnell 1995: 60–6; Ingstad 1995: 141; Figs 6.14, 6.15). Like the ‘weapon dancers’ these men hold up a sword and spears or staffs, have helmets with small horn-like projections and are similarly attired in long jackets. Interestingly, on the processional figure a number of objects appear to hang from the arms of his coat, which should be borne in mind considering the similar appearance of shaman’s jackets from Siberia as seen in chapter 5 (cf. Devlet 2001: 44ff). Whether the Oseberg ‘dancers’ are intended to depict human or supernatural beings is unclear.

These ‘weapon dancers’ are related to similar images on metalwork from the preceding centuries, showing warriors in almost identical positions. Some of the earliest examples come from the metal plates decorating the high-status helmets of the Migration Period, primarily in Sweden but also found in England and Germany. We have seen some of these already above, in the examples that also contain an image of a probable *ulfheðinn* – the plates and mounts from Torslunda, Gutenheim and Obrigheim. In addition to these, the ‘weapon dancers’ are also found in various permutations on sixth- to seventh-century helmet plates from Vendel, Valsgärde, Gamla Uppsala and Sutton Hoo (there is a considerable literature on these objects, but see Arent 1969 for an overview).



Fig. 6.12 The silver ‘weapon dancer’ pendant from a female inhumation, Birka grave Bj. 571 (photo Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum, used by kind permission).

On the Sutton Hoo helmet the ‘dancers’ are paired, facing each other in a mirror image, holding crossed spears and a sword. In the Uppland graves they also occur in connection with rider motifs, in the form of a small ‘dancer’ standing on the back of a horse, almost running up its flank (*e.g.* Valsgärde 8). In turn these rider icons are developed further, with two ravens flanking the horseman (Vendel 1); similar motifs are also found on bracteates. Other combat scenes with warriors holding angled spears (*e.g.* Vendel XII) may also be related to the ‘dancers’.

A more graphic variation of the ‘dancer’ figure appears alone on a belt-buckle plate from a seventh-century male grave at Finglesham in Kent. The image shows an almost naked man – his genitals are clearly shown – wearing only a belt and the familiar horned helmet with birds-head terminals. In each hand he holds a spear (Hawkes *et al.* 1965).

The interpretation of the ‘dancers’ as Óðinn has a long history (cf. Ellis Davidson 1972: 12–16; 1996: 35–9), and rests on several features: the symbolic spear, the fact that at least one of the figures is one-eyed, the staff, the ravens, and the connection to the *ulfheðnar*. Perhaps the paired dancers are *both* Óðinn – we should remember that one of his names means ‘Double’.



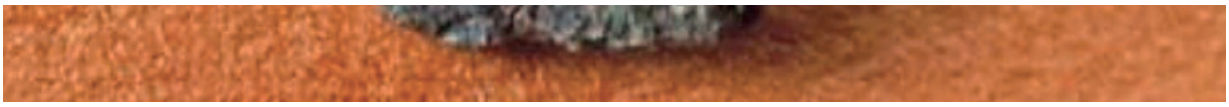


Fig. 6.13 The bronze ‘weapon dancer’ figurine from a Viking Age woman’s burial (grave 6) in gravefield 4 at Ekhammar, Kungsängen parish, Uppland, Sweden (photo by Sören Hallgren, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons).

The ‘horns’ on the helmets of these figures are enigmatic, as in all examples except that from Oseberg they seem more to sit behind or on top of the head, rather than protruding from the sides. This iconographic puzzle may be solved by two other objects that bear clearly related images. One of these is a small Viking-Age pendant from Ribe in Denmark, formed as the head of a moustachioed man, apparently without a helmet but with two birds emerging from his temples. One of the figure’s eyes bears a punch mark, suggesting that this too is a representation of Óðinn (Jensen 1991: 50, with parallels to another similar object from Ribe and one more from Gotland). The second artefact of interest here is a small bronze item found in a hoard of smith’s tools in mid-eighth-century levels at Staraja Ladoga. Formed as what appears to be the handle of an unknown object, perhaps a slender wand of some kind, the piece is topped by a finely cast head of a man with long hair, a beard and moustache. He is *not* wearing a helmet, but pressed against the back of the figure’s head, rather like a halo, is a near-circular band terminating in two birds’ heads, appearing from the front like the horns on the ‘dancer’ images (Roesdahl & Wilson 1992: 150, 298). I have examined this object in the Hermitage storage facilities in St. Petersburg, and there is a definite trace of a blow to the right eye of the figure, again as if to mark it in some way.



Fig. 6.14 A scene from the Oseberg tapestry. At far left centre is a horned 'weapon dancer' figure holding two staffs or spears, and to his right an armed

man apparently wearing an animal skin. To the right of the fragment is a building with a roof of spears, with a shield-wall of warriors in front of it – a depiction of Valholl? (drawing by Sofie Krafft).

Both the Ribe and Ladoga pieces therefore strongly suggest that the ‘horns’ on the helmets of the ‘dancers’ in fact represent stylised birds, circling behind the figures’ heads – a clear suggestion that this really is Óðinn with his ravens Huginn and Muninn.



Fig. 6.15 A scene from the Oseberg tapestry, with what appears to be a procession of horses, wagons and pedestrians. Note the bird figures at centre top, and the 'weapon dancer' at top left with objects hanging from the sleeves of his jacket (drawing by Sofie Krafft).

Most of the 'dancers' are clothed in the same kind of skirted jacket as the silver pendant figurines. However, those on the Torslunda helmet die and the Fingelsham buckle are both naked except for a belt, and in the case of the former a baldrick for his sword. This nudity may have sexual overtones, and as we have seen on the Finglesham warrior the genitalia are clearly depicted. The employment of these images on material culture also illustrates the way in which their meanings were conveyed. We see this in the pendants worn by women, the icons on the helmets of the pre-Viking period, and the leaders of the cultic procession on the tapestry from Oseberg.

In the 'weapon dancers' as in other categories of material culture, all the same elements are present again. We have followed this pattern a long way, from the nature of *seiðr* and the other sorceries through their cultural analogues, and from their practitioners to the purpose of their practices. The links remain constant in the sexual implications of the rituals, their embeddedness in the wider social framework and world-view, and the connections with Óðinn. We are now ready to conclude with an overview of this 'Viking way', and an assessment of what it may have meant for the nature of the Viking Age itself.

7

The Viking way

[T]o a very large extent power consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality – even, as is so often the case, when that story is written in their blood.

Philip Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* (1999: 48f)

In 1990 the Hungarian historian Gábor Klaniczay published a collected edition of his papers as *The uses of supernatural power*. As we have seen in chapter 6, his work has explored the almost universal permeation of everyday life in post-Reformation Europe by beliefs in sorcery and a 'magical universe' (cf. Wilson 2000). Crucially, Klaniczay understands the symbiosis between this social environment and the political structures with which it was suffused. The connections to my arguments in this book are obvious, and his chosen title could easily have been applicable to this aspect of early Scandinavian culture. It is no accident that the second edition of the present volume has a new subtitle: *magic and mind* in late Iron Age Scandinavia.

In this book I have tried to explore two sources of social power in the Viking Age, what we would now call religion and war, and to examine the relationships between them. These are problematic arenas of behaviour, as we have seen, perceived very differently in the early medieval period by comparison with our modern view of such categories. So, how should we understand their operation at the time of the Vikings – not as the dry definitions of academia, but in their fullest social context?

At the simplest level they share one feature above all, and through which they are joined, namely the battle-god, Óðinn. Keeping in mind this

connection, we can then begin to follow the specific elements of Óðinn's power in different directions, one connected with *seiðr* and its related rituals, another embodied (literally) in the concept of shape-shifting and what anthropologists would once have called 'totemism', the supernatural link between the natures of human beings and animals. Of course, all these elements are interlaced with one another, as we have seen, and any deconstruction of them should be seen as the unravelling of something that was in fact tightly wound.

Within these strands of belief and practice we have also encountered human individuals in whom they were manifested, people who took on and mediated these aspects of Óðinn's nature. Within the *seiðr* complex there were many different types of sorcerers, as we have explored in the terminologies of chapter 3. For ease of expression here we can call them *seiðkonur* and *seiðmenn* – '*seiðr*-women' and '*seiðr*-men' – in the knowledge that behind these two terms lie a great many more, including some in which the conventional gender categories of 'men' and 'women' were blurred and redefined. In the complex of shape-shifting and animal transformation, expressed as a semi-permanent aspect of human nature rather than as temporary sorcerous change, we find the lycanthropic warriors of Óðinn, the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*. These two groups, the '*seiðr*-people' and the battle-mad fighters, were some of the means through which the ecstatic energies of the gods seem to have been channeled.

In the pages above, I have argued not only that many aspects of Viking-Age ritual were fundamentally shamanistic in nature (with all the necessary caveats of definition), but that one of the main purposes of this shamanism was as a kind of battle magic. The supernatural empowerment of violence encountered in the preceding chapter, I would suggest, formed a link between the sacred and profane in a ritualisation of the aggression crucial to a warrior society.

Human access to the unseen forces of battle would seem to have been within the gender domain of women and a special class of men seen as different from the socially-acceptable norm – our '*seiðr*-people' of all kinds. This was supported by otherworldly, female agents of violence such as the *valkyrjur* and other spirit-beings. Equally subordinate to Óðinn were the predominantly male warriors who translated these forces into practice on the

battlefields of the human world, through ‘totemistic’ identification with the animals that in other forms were themselves also a feature of the shamanic performances. Clearly there is an element of sexual division here, separating the warrior men and the magic-working women, but an easy binary of this kind is too broad-brushed to really capture the nuance of Viking-Age gendered realities. Alongside this we also see a range of other identities that are harder to define and which transcend these categories, the social actors and actions through whom the artificial simplicities of ‘religion’ and ‘war’ were expressed. Thus we can understand ritualised and physical aggression as different components of a larger whole, a gender-encoded fusion of these social forces through the medium of spiritual power.

If we focus on this as a kind of socio-political construct in late Iron Age society, as I have argued above, then there are two final elements that we can add. The first of these relates to all the other people, in fact the bulk of the Norse population, who do not fall into the categories discussed here. In a vital sense they are at the centre of this pattern, as are their leaders and those who perform cultic functions in other interactive situations with the gods. It is through *all* these individuals that these practices operated and acquired meaning.

The second element to add concerns the fundamental perception of existence, expressed in a myriad of different forms. Assuming we follow this line of reasoning to begin with, then in accordance with the broader studies set out in chapter 5 the *seiðr*-related aspects of Óðinnic power could clearly be encompassed within a ‘shamanic’ world-view. Is it going too far to suggest that the ‘totemic’ sphere could be called a ‘Viking’ world-view, in the exact sense of this term?

It should be emphasised again that this is an *inclusive* perception of society – we should perhaps think of the different sources of social power articulated here as instead covering the inner surface of a sphere. Although they are isolated and extrapolated for examination, this is merely a dissection of something that would seem to have been originally a functioning organism.

Becoming a Viking may not therefore have been simply a rapid route to wealth or improved status (or failing that, a deathly communion with Óðinn). It could also have constituted a profoundly religious act. The path of the ritual warrior may have been a deeply spiritual acknowledgement of the gods and

their place in the cosmos, never forgetting of course the more avaricious agenda of personal gain. One of the continually recurring motifs in Viking poetry, and also on the inscriptions of runestones, is the preoccupation with remembrance and specifically with fame after death. It is important to note here that the amorality of the Norse gods was not thought to impair the ultimate dignity of humanity, and it is this that I would argue was the essence of the Viking warriors' relationship to their deities. Similarly, this forms a key element of the ritualised aggression that I suggest was embedded in their ideology.

There is also a further dimension of warfare in which we find fundamental differences between modern sensibilities and those of the Viking Age, namely the manner in which the individual combatant is viewed by society in a broader sense. For the last two or three centuries, and especially since the First World War, our culture has been accustomed to seeing soldiers as victims (and sometimes as politicised heroes), a perception which is extended even to former enemies. Before the 1700s, however, this idea "would have been quite alien to many of our ancestors for much of history" (Keegan 1998: 47). For civilians up until the middle of the eighteenth century, an approaching army of any affiliation was inevitably to be feared, the key point being that until early modern times the warrior was *by definition* a hated figure: "soldiers ate and drank at the common people's expense, uncontrolled by their officers; they … took what they chose, including sexual favours, paid for nothing and, if opposed, tortured and killed" (*ibid*: 48). Alongside the social embeddedness that we have discussed above, this perception of the fighting man and what he meant to those in his path is also characteristic of the Viking Age, and generally in contrast to the modern understanding of those who prosecute 'war'. We can compare this with the historian Richard Cobb's observations on the French Revolution, and in particular its years of simmering aggression that occasionally spilled over into acts of extreme violence:

Cobb never forgets that such moments are rare in a human life, as they are rare in human history. The fear, the anticipation, and the memory of violence may be pervasive, but the moment itself is surrounded and given context by a lifetime of work, love, mourning, illness, shopping, play, boredom, and so on.

Barnes 2002: 10

This has something important to say to us about life in a society for which war is a kind of norm.

A reality in stories

All these forces apparently operated within the social structures of an Iron Age, essentially tribal or clan-based system – the system that to a large degree changed and evolved during the Viking period into the state-based polities with which Scandinavia entered the Middle Ages. The ‘shamanic’ rituals, the complex character of Óðinn and the other matters taken up in the preceding chapters all have a political context, but one which changes over time from a dispersed to a concentrate form. We should also remember those ‘domestic’ objectives of sorcery, as the prosecution of battle was far from the only purpose to which *seiðr* and its analogues were put. This book is not a synthesis of Viking magic, but rather an exploration of some of its primary functions. The same applies to the aspects of *noaidevuohta* and circumpolar belief that we have examined.

The ‘Viking’ identity that we have discussed fitted into this Iron Age society as an articulation of its warrior ideology, but also as a channel for the wielding of political influence.

This proposes more than the existence of a male military elite supported by a semi-religious power base (not an uncommon theory for Iron Age societies), partly by virtue of its scope and partly through its subject matter and approaches to it. The integration of such a power-base with a gender-encoded control of organised violence, such as I have here proposed, can be seen as one of the defining characteristics of what we have chosen to label the Viking Age. We can observe this even in modern contexts, when a ruling class imposes an orthodoxy of violence upon a population, in a manner that implicates every citizen regardless of where they stand in the intended scheme of things. In his analysis of the Rwandan genocide quoted at the head of the chapter, Philip Gourevitch identifies just such a phenomenon in what he has called “the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality”, through which leaders configure society in their own image (1999: 48f).

The many disparate ends of the Viking period came with a second, better understood and less controversial ideological change: the continuing process of state formation and the assimilation of royal power in Scandinavia within

the orbit of Christian Europe. In effect this deliberate re-orientation of culture and ideology marks a different ‘choice’ of power structures, focusing on the transition to self-representation in a manner that makes much of the Iron Age ritual system not only obsolete but actively undesirable.

This is an important point because we should not always assume a ‘top-down’ system of power in these circumstances. In the early, definitively pre-Christian part of the Viking Age, we should ask to what extent did elites need men like the *berserkir*, and to what extent did the latter press themselves into the service of the former? Were such warriors ever a particularly sought-after part of the trappings of rulership? Indeed, instead of the Viking identity mentioned above we might almost conceptualise this as an identity of violence itself. In very many ways, by the late tenth century the cultures of Scandinavia may have been approaching the limits of what they could absorb in terms of the socially-situated aggression laid out in this book. It was beginning to outlive its usefulness, and the transformations that today make us set a terminus of *c.*1050 for our artificial ‘Viking Age’ partly relate to this.

In parallel, we can see other, perhaps deeper changes in social structure. One of these concerns sexuality and gender. Throughout the later Iron Age it is possible to perceive a need to negotiate sex as a form of cultural expression. During the late Viking period especially, what it meant to be – in our terms – a heterosexual or a homosexual was changing. Social attitudes towards women were also being transformed, mostly for the worse in terms of their sanctioned potential for self-determination as their agency was constrained by Christianity. The ambiguous identities that were created through the war rituals of *seiðr* and its correlates may also have proved difficult to sustain. We may view similar tensions in other contexts. For example, how did the sexual aspects of these complexes play out in the ordinary domestic sphere, in as much as such a thing may be said to have existed? Who married the *volur*, or the *seiðmenn*? What was it like to be the partner of an *ulfheðinn*, or for that matter of any Viking who returned home from months of murderous rapine abroad?

In part, the nature of human beings themselves was being redefined, and we need only look to the conceptions of animals to understand this. Many of these changes were of course related to the steady impact of the new faith, but many of them also took place independently as the overall needs of society

altered. Nevertheless, other aspects of this pre-Christian view of things survived through the Middle Ages and beyond. In Iceland still today, for example, the majority of the population believe in an active supernatural world, following a changing but genuinely ancient tradition that can ultimately be traced back to the mentalities of the Viking Age and the sagas. Either replacing Christian ideas or operating alongside them, this form of spiritual knowledge especially concerns the extra-corporeal aspects of the self such as the *fylgjur*, but also the power of dreams and foresight, the restless dead, and more ambiguous beings such as *álfar* and *huldufólk*, the 'Hidden People' – all familiar from Norse mythology (see Erlendur Haraldsson 1978; Hastrup 1998; Heijnen 2001; Gunnell 2008b).

In much of what I have written above, as in most works that deal with spiritual belief, there are passages in which the 'reality' of what is described is not clarified. Of course, there are not 'really' any *troll*, *gandir*, *valkyrjur*, and so on? From my own generally materialist perspective I would agree, unsurprisingly, but this is not the subject of this book. One of the key themes that I have tried to pursue here is that *seiðr* and all its attendant rituals, the whole complex of a possible Norse 'shamanism' and its correlates, is nothing less than a view of the nature of reality itself. And of course, what is real depends on how one defines reality in the first place.

This raises the question as to how this scheme of ritualised violence might actually have felt to those immersed in it. We can never know with certainty, of course, but it is possible nonetheless try to reunite the components of such a world-view that have been discussed separately above. What would the 'battlefield of animals' actually have looked like?

The invisible battlefield

In the background somewhere, perhaps the *nornir*, or the terrible women of *Darraðarljóð*, are spinning the web of war that will decide the outcome of battle. On looms of power, perhaps made from human bodies, the grey cloth is slowly taking shape, dyed with blood. Each thread is a man's life, weaving in and out of those around him. In Valholl and Sessrumnir, benches are being cleared and a reception prepared for those who will shortly be taking their places in the halls of the gods.

On the battlefield, the *valkyrjur* have arrived after their journey from the other world, their swan-wings spreading white behind them. Their horses

gallop across the sky, with perhaps a light rain falling as they shake the sweat from their flanks. The fighting begins, and individual warriors live or die by the *valkyrjur*'s favour as they move over the field. They live up to their names: Herfjotur seizes the combatants, freezing their muscles as the enemy approaches; Mist lays a fog of confusion over their minds; Hlokk and Sveið exult in the deafening sound that rises from the mass of fighting men. This moment belongs to Skalmold, the 'sword-time'. Hjalmþrimul's voice is heard when blades bounce off helmets, and Geirdríful follows the showers of spears. As weapons take chunks out of shields, Randgníðr's teeth and nails leave their marks in the wood. Sigrdrífa urges her favourites on to victory. Perhaps the heroes each have a special protector, standing behind them, flying above them, fending off the blows.

And who is to say that the weather is not also magically influenced, as the opposing army fights into the teeth of a storm or driving snow? Gale-force winds and sudden fog may appear, or terrible showers of hail. Lightning stabs about the field.

Behind the battle, some of the sorcerers whose aid has been called upon may be present in person, perhaps sitting on platforms. *Volur*, *seiðkonur* and the others are there, singly or in groups, perhaps ringed by a chanting enclosure of assistants. Perhaps some *seiðmenn* are present too, though most people shudder and give them a wide berth. Spells and counter-spells criss-cross the field – charms to render weapons unbreakable, or brittle as ice; charms to increase agility, or to induce a fatal stumble; charms to cloud the mind, or bring clear-sightedness; charms to make the wearer invulnerable, or to reduce the effects of his armour.

The sorcerers change form, their spirits fighting in the sky in constantly shifting animal shapes, sometimes even transforming into weapons or sharpened objects to pierce their opponents' toughened hides. They try to overcome each new choice of form, thinking ahead to gain an advantage. Some try to block the route home between body and spirit, forcing the free souls of their enemies to drift to shapeless destruction.

On the ground below, *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* echo the bestial theme. They run howling and foaming through the groups of fighting men. Some of them wear animal skins, some are naked, and some have thrown away shields and armour to rely on their consuming frenzy alone. Perhaps some of the

greatest warriors do not take the field at all, but remain behind in their tents, their minds nevertheless focused on the combat. As huge animals their spirit forms wade through the battle, wreaking havoc.

Perhaps a pale man in a broad-brimmed hat can be seen walking here and there on the field, but indistinctly, always just out of the corner of your eye. He carries a staff and two ravens fly above him.

Apparently slain fighters return to life, shaking off their concussions and picking up their swords – perhaps *seiðr* has revived them? In the confusion of the fighting, especially if there are large armies in play, how can the endless stream of reinforcements be explained except by the dead coming back to swell the ranks again?

Great battle-trolls like Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr can also be perceived, standing alone or in groups around their masters, laying waste the men before them. Other beings like the *gandir* may be running about the field – the wolf breaths of the *gondull*, or something summoned and unleashed through *útiseta*. Underground, other creatures move to assist the sorcerers fighting above them.

None of this can be seen by the ordinary Viking, of course, but what else could explain that lucky spear-cast, that man's amazing survival after such a blow, the incredible accuracy of that arrow? Why else would such a dexterous warrior trip like that, and how could such an imbecile manage to bring down that veteran of many battles? Where did this awful downpour come from, when the sky was clear an hour ago? It's a good thing that your side has their own sorcerers, lucky you had those *galdrar* sung over you, and remembered to bring your amulets and charms. That jackdaw's leg has never failed you yet. At least so far you've been able to rely on Óðinn, or Þórr, or Freyja, or any of the others – though there is always the risk that today you will be among the chosen slain, that you will quench the thirst of battle with a horn of mead that is always refilled, honoured at last to sit with the *einherjar* and to hear the words of the *Eiríksmál* from the lips of a god: *Heill nú, vel skalt hér kominn ok gakk í holl*, 'Hail to you, be welcome here and come into the hall!'.

Nothing is certain except the wolf and the Ragnarok.

Material magic

The above is a composite image, of course, like one of those reconstruction drawings that shows every household activity occurring simultaneously. Both

on and off the battlefield a good deal of these perceptions were probably perfunctory, and unarticulated in any detailed sense. This does not mean that they did not run deep in social terms. In the written sources from the twelfth century and onwards there is little to suggest that the church was worried about the old gods returning to people's minds: Óðinn had become an old-fashioned synonym for the Devil, albeit more charismatic and interesting than his biblical counterpart. Again and again however, we see a fear that the *popular* beliefs of the pagan period would surface. The world of superstition and sorcery, of everyday negotiations with the supernatural, the world of *seiðr*, did not disappear with the coming of Christianity. Indeed, it may even have been strengthened by the threat that the latter presented towards the end of the Viking Age.

In support of this, I cannot emphasise too strongly that the literary examples of Old Norse sorcery that I have taken up here represent only a small fraction of the total corpus. As I stated in chapter 3, the sagas are *saturated* with descriptions of socially-embedded magic of different kinds, and the supernatural in general. The material legacy that all this has left behind is meagre, but not unintelligible.

Clearly, a tight chronology is lacking for much of the data presented here. We have considered archaeology from all periods of the Viking Age and to some degree from the centuries before, skaldic poetry from its closing years, Eddic poetry of possible Viking-Age ancestry, and medieval sagas (themselves spanning several centuries). Beyond the Nordic scene, the Sámi and circumpolar sources range over an even longer span of time, with an emphasis on early modern accounts and ethnographies of the last three hundred years. We should not shrink from the acknowledgement that in one sense it is simply not possible to trace a detailed chronological line in this material, other than through the broadest distinctions of the earlier and later parts of the Viking Age. As I have repeatedly stressed, regional variation and change over time are hallmarks of these phenomena, but isolating or cataloguing this spectrum is a different matter entirely. We should at the same time be wary of approaching the people of the Viking Age in the abstract – it was the most particular of times, and almost every aspect of its culture needs to be viewed at the level of the specific rather than the general.

In looking at the written sources we need to ask what they hide, alter or obscure – up to a point, these questions can be answered in the archaeology. When we look at the material culture, we need to ask how representative it is, what larger world of the mind produced these objects. In considering the 'intangibles' that we raised in chapter 1 – religion, spirituality, belief – it is also important to ask what physical traces these might be *expected* to leave. The relative sparsity of the archaeology of *seiðr* and its analogues does not in any way refute the evidence of the written sources, nor should it surprise us. Still, given the preponderance of texts among our available data, should an archaeologist not give up and leave these problems to historians of religions, philologists and historians? Again, the answer is no, because it is only through an archaeological agenda that these sources can be approached in this particular way. In the first chapter I argued for the exclusively 'archaeological' nature of this book: I hope it is now clear what I meant by this.

Viking women, Viking men

Throughout this work, *seiðr* has expanded beyond the framework within which it has been conventionally interpreted. I have tried not only to tease out elements of sorcery buried in the sources, but also to illuminate those that have been neglected or even hidden by a different direction of scholarship. I have argued that the operative environment of *seiðr* and its related rituals can be traced from methods of seeing the future in a domestic setting, through a complex field of functions more or less related to daily life, to a convoluted form of sexual magic that pushed at the permitted boundaries of its social context, and finally to a formidable means of unleashing destruction in a variety of circumstances.

It might even have harnessed the very forces from which the worlds were created and through which they may, perhaps, be reborn. Nor is it unwarranted to expect the *seiðr* complex to have fulfilled such a primary role in some way or another – after all, as we have seen in chapter 5 a similarly fundamental social function is performed by almost all the shamanic belief systems of the circumpolar region. Why should that of the Viking-Age Scandinavians have been any different in this respect? Even if we qualify its 'shamanic' interpretation as I have done above, we are still left with the *imperative* of acknowledging the place of such a belief system at the core of its adherents'

view of the world. In the light of every known parallel, it cannot be relegated to merely being an interesting practice, to be discussed in passing.

I began this book by citing some examples of 'different' Viking lives that I felt had largely been overlooked or under-represented in our models of the period. These people should now be more familiar to the reader, and their •actions can be set in context: the 'naked and wary kindler of the pyre' (in Foote & Wilson's phrase, 1980: 411) comes from Ibn Fadlan, and may tell us something about the nature of spirits and the dangerous circumstances of a funeral, as the man seeks to ensure that nothing can emerge from the grave •and enter his body; the six-legged reindeer appear on one of the Överhogdal weaves, and hint at lost histories of Sámi-Norse interaction, perhaps illustrating the supernatural animals that shamans believed they rode on their •journeys to another world; the women weaving destruction on their terrible loom are from *Darraðarljóð*, and give us insights into Norse ideas about fate and doom, the nature of the *valkyrjur*, and the supernatural preordination of •battle; the cross-dressing male-bodied Sámi is from grave 9 at Vivallen, and we have seen how his clothes that have traversed boundaries of culture, gender and context can reveal something of relations between the Norse and their neighbours, and perhaps indicate the equipment of an early medieval •*noaidi*; the men who ran with the wolves are the father-and-son *ulfheðnar* from *Volsunga saga*, providing an intimate vision of shape-shifters in battle, together with the incestuous *seiðr* rituals in their past that ultimately led to •them embarking on that path; the sword-bearing women can still be seen walking under their tree today on the tapestry from Oseberg in the stores of the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, contemporary witnesses to the war-rituals •undertaken by female functionaries in the Viking Age; the sexual trials of an adolescent slave-girl on her way to the next life also come first-hand from Ibn Fadlan, and provide uncomfortably graphic proof of the importance of the •erotic in the ritual world of the Vikings; the woman who went to her grave with exotic jewellery and the drugs that were a hallmark of her trade was found in the cemetery at Fyrkat, where she was honoured in her funeral gifts above all others buried in the shadow of Haraldr's circular symbol of power – whatever label we apply, she is the tangible reality behind all the *volur*, *seiðkonur* and 'riders' of the saga stories.

These eight examples from alternating archaeological and written sources are not uncontroversial. Like any other aspect of the period they are subject to source-critical scrutiny, cross-examination and alternative interpretation. In one more thing too though, they are symbolic of the material presented throughout this book: whatever we think of them, we must nevertheless offer an interpretation. They cannot be ignored or marginalised.

When archaeological and textual perspectives, and the disparate sources they rely on, are permitted to illuminate each other rather than being kept within defensive disciplinary borders, I believe that the result is a new dimension of ‘the Viking way’ – a way of thinking and a way of being. The challenge laid down here is for students of the Viking Age to find a more plausible reading than mine.

8

Magic and mind

And these people […] were a curious mix, rooted and practical, but living easily among dreams and stories and superstition, one ear always pressed against the night-world, or whatever it was, the correct name for that part of life people were forgetting how to address.

Andrew Miller, *Now We Shall Be Entirely Free* (2018: 403)

Receptions and reactions

In 2002, the preceding chapters attempted to offer something new in Viking studies, an acknowledgment of the variety, depth and social importance of sorcery in the lives of the early medieval Scandinavians – as a reviewer later put it, "not magic realism, but the realism behind the magic" (Carver 2004: 165). As we have seen, there had been many previous studies of its individual components, Strömbäck's monumental study of *seiðr* probably chief amongst them, but they were never integrated into more general syntheses of Viking-Age culture, or even of belief and ritual practice. The *volur* and their kind may have saturated the medieval saga corpus, but they simply did not seem to register in the late twentieth-century perceptions of the actual period that the Old Norse tales claimed to retrospectively describe.

If *The Viking Way* achieved anything, it was to change this picture. For the first time, a critical assessment of the role of sorcery, and the lived experiences of its practitioners and commissioners, gradually began to take its place alongside the other, more familiar elements of the Vikings'

complex world. Sorcery and its contingent understandings of reality became more generally embedded in overviews of the Viking Age, sometimes with quite extensive discussion (*e.g.* Richards 2005; Clements 2005; Hall 2007; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008; Ferguson 2009; Herschend 2009; Griffiths 2010; Hedeager 2011: part III, an especially important work with a focus on transformation, animal embodiment and gender; Svavar Sigmundsson 2011; Lihammer 2012; Kyhlberg 2012; Andersson 2013, 2016; Carroll *et al.* 2014; Eriksen *et al.* 2015; Barraclough 2016: ch. 3; Roesdahl 2016; Lund & Arwill-Nordbladh 2016; Shippey 2018).

This new inclusivity also extended to the level of the individual, when the *volva* and her sisters appeared among the serial social biographies in a collection of *Vikingaliv* ('Viking Lives'; Harrison & Svensson 2007: 52–81), and would do so again in Swedish collections of Iron Age tales told through archaeology (Graner 2007: 52–61; G. Andersson 2015; K. Andersson 2018: 110–15, 168–73, 180–5). These women also took their place among female cult leaders (*e.g.* Rosengren 2008).

All this work after 2002 was supplemented by a raft of my own papers, which in their various ways helped to further synthesise these ideas and locate them within the critical scholarly consensus of the Vikings (Price 2003, 2004a–b, 2005a–c, 2006a, 2008b, 2014a).

A key element of my argument was for the contextualisation of important aspects of sorcery within an essentially militaristic ideology that implicated all of society. This has been widely followed, for example as the epilogue for a major synthesis of social development in the Swedish kingdom and its central focus on the Mälar valley (Hagerman 2011: 395), as aspects of archaeological surveys in the same region (*e.g.* Ljungkvist 2006; Anund 2007), and in the context of the main late Iron Age power centre at Gamla Uppsala (Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2017; Eriksson 2018). I have also used it myself as a means of discussing not the 'Otherness' of the Vikings (cf. ch. 1) but instead a disturbing connection:

[I]t is not often now we speak of a pre-Christian Viking 'religion' at all – it was far more than that: a total view of the world, a complete, and very different, understanding of the nature of reality itself […] *That* was what the Vikings' victims were afraid of, and it is also what we are starting to really

get to grips with. But there is something more. I think that fear of the Vikings not only arose because they were so different, but because in that difference lay some horribly unnerving kind of familiarity. The Anglo-Saxons, for example, knew that this Viking world-view was not so far removed from what theirs had been not so long before, and maybe, under the surface, still was – and I think that realization frightened them. The Vikings were not only conventionally terrifying, they were also a dark mirror held up to the image of what the English needed to believe themselves to be. The same probably applied to the Franks and the other Continental peoples.

Price 2015a: 7

The notion seems to have found a receptive audience, and has also now begun to be taken up by others (*e.g.* Williams 2017: 142; Blair 2018: 51).

Remarkably, the day after this new edition was submitted to the publishers, and thus included here as a last-minute addition, a new publication was launched that precisely captures the sense of the overlooked that I was trying for in chapter 1. In words of editor Amy Jefford Franks, *Kyngervi* ('gender' in Icelandic) "is a new journal focussing on the 'Other' in Old Norse studies, looking at anything Norse-related on themes of gender, queer, race, disability and animal studies – we aim to bring the marginalised to the forefront". This is a very exciting development indeed, and sure to yield good things.

The first edition also found a different kind of reception beyond the academy, taking its own trajectory outside the span of my own publications. The ideas set out in *The Viking Way* were featured in several television documentaries and radio interviews, as well as a large number of public lectures, including some to predominantly Sámi audiences. The popular reception of the book also took on some unexpected forms. In Denmark, a trilogy of plays by Ebbe Kløvedal Reich and Jørgen Larsen was based on my interpretation of the woman in grave 4 at the Fyrkat cemetery. Presented as part of the annual Fyrkatspillet performed on-site at the Viking fortress, the sequence began in 2004 with *Mandebod* ('Blood-Price'), continued the following year with *Rejsen* ('The Journey') and concluded in the summer of

2006 with *Siri*, named after the main female character. My views on the fighting rages of the *berserkir* were even discussed – from an unsettlingly practical perspective – by American troops serving in Iraq on their dedicated internet chat rooms, after someone had scanned and uploaded sections of the book there. In terms of more ancient combat, modern armourers have also used my work in their recreations of Viking Age weapons. By the same token, interest continued in the Pagan and Ásatrú communities, and I often see versions of the reconstruction drawings in this book being worn by participants in Viking markets and festivals.

Alongside specific responses to the book, Viking studies itself has hardly been static since 2002 (see Price 2005d, 2015a & c for attempts at an overview; cf. Brink & Price 2008). Of relevance to this book, we have seen the appearance of a number of new syntheses of Viking-Age religion, and several specialist studies of its individual aspects, including sorcery. Conferences and exhibitions have also been devoted to this topic. Not least, the exemplary *Vägar till Midgård* project in Lund and Stockholm has completed its publication programme, and this alone has added many hundreds of thousands of words to these debates (Andrén *et al.* 2001–2014). Circumpolar, Sámi and shamanic research has also continued to expand, as has the archaeo-anthropological study of warfare, violence and sexuality – all themes central to this book. Textual scholarship too has generated new insights into the 'Viking way' of my title, especially through landmark studies of Eddic poetry and witchcraft, and a number of new editions of key texts. These and other new publications are discussed in more detail below, broadly following the sequential narrative of the preceding chapters.

Cracks in the ice of Norse 'religion'

During the years of research on the first edition of this book, I was one of many scholars in inter-disciplinary Viking studies who in our various ways were all wrestling with what we saw as the problems of Norse religion. These concerns included the basic realisation that it could not viably be called a 'religion' at all, and indeed that there was no 'it' to begin with. Instead, the myriad beliefs, practices, superstitions and, probably, even the contemporary spiritual vaguenesses and confusions of the Viking Age

began to fracture and run off in their own directions – like a previously smooth plain of ice cracking apart with the thaw (an image the Vikings would have liked).

At first it seemed all we could do to keep our footing – to extend the metaphor – and in chapter 2 I alluded to this discussion as things stood in 2002. Since then, however, there has been an exponential growth of research and we are standing on firmer ground. Alongside the overviews that incorporated the ideas of the first edition, as mentioned above, we see this increasing questioning of our terms and conditions in a number of key works (*e.g.* Berthell 2006; Brink 2007; Schjødt 2008, 2009, 2012; Raudvere & Schjødt 2012; Hermann *et al.* 2017; Terry Gunnell has also published more or less continuously on this theme over the past decade and more).

My reading of Old Norse sorcery and its place in the wider complex of spiritual belief has also been discussed in the specific context of mythology, folklore, ideology and the history of religions (*e.g.* Nordberg 2003, 2013; Steinsland 2005: ch. 19; Bonnetain 2006, 2007; Andrén & Carelli 2006; Lund 2006, 2009; Sundqvist 2007, 2016; Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007; Capelle & Fischer 2007; Ewing 2008; Patton 2009: ch. 7; Näsström 2009; Abram 2011; Jennbert 2011; Helmbrecht 2011; Andrén 2011, 2014; Winroth 2012: ch. 11; Gardeła 2014b; Murphy 2016; Ney 2017; Hultgård 2017; and several papers in Andrén *et al.* 2006; Kaplan & Tangherlini 2012; Tangherlini 2014; Tesch 2017; together with collections cited in the preceding chapters). Scholars of early medieval funerary ritual have also engaged with the book, not least in an Anglo-Saxon context (*e.g.* Williams 2006; Redmond 2007; Semple & Williams 2007; Sayer & Williams 2009).

While much of this work has been incorporated piecemeal into the revised version of the preceding chapters, the sheer quantity of new literature – easily running to a shelf metre or two – unfortunately precludes a detailed engagement with the many different ways in which my ideas have been adopted, supported, critiqued, opposed, and otherwise discussed in this liveliest of research fields. I can only urge the interested reader to dive deeper into the works listed above.

Special mention must be made of a key publication by Catharina Raudvere (2003) which appeared mere months after my own book. Her

volume covers very similar ground to my own, though from the perspective of a historian of religions and in part using different material, but was produced in parallel with *The Viking Way*. Neither of us was aware of the other work in progress (Raudvere 2003: 7f), but I have incorporated references to the relevant sections of her book in the preceding chapters.

In parallel with these developments, the past decade or so has seen a fantastic proliferation of source-critical studies of the textual foundations of Norse 'religion'. In terms of primary texts, the third volume of Ursula Dronke's monumental edition of the *Poetic Edda* has at last appeared, sadly posthumously (2011), and the new eight-volume series of skaldic poetry is nearing completion as this present book goes to press (Clunies Ross 2008–2017). Richard North and colleagues (2011) have also produced an excellent compendium of new translations across a variety of key sources. In addition to some outstanding handbooks and companions on the Old Norse corpus as a whole (*e.g.* O'Donoghue 2004; McTurk 2007; Clunies Ross 2010; North & Allard 2012; Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson 2017), there are now several fine collections on the intricacies of the Eddic poems (*e.g.* Acker & Larrington 2002; McKinnell 2014; Larrington *et al.* 2016), and also on individual saga genres (*e.g.* Lassen *et al.* 2009, 2012). Readers interested in the outline of Old Norse textual scholarship given in chapter 2 can now deepen their engagement with reference to these works.

In the years since the first edition, Norse mythology has also been gifted with at least three new interpreters from the literary world. Antonia Byatt (2011) has interwoven the stories with her childhood memories, in a collection that – quite by chance – resonates wonderfully with my choice of opening quotation in chapter 1 above. She also very properly (in my opinion!) emphasises Ragnarok as something that marks how the worlds, "…came to an end. A real End. The end." (Byatt 2011: 9). More recently, two giants of fantasy writing have each contributed their own take on the Viking mind. Neil Gaiman (2017) gives a subversive slant on the gods' personalities and behaviour, subtly tailored to contemporary concerns, while the man he calls "the Master" – Kevin Crossley-Holland – revisits his deep knowledge of northern legend and builds on an earlier collection that once inspired me as a teenager (1980, 2017).

Walking into the *seiðr*: contested interpretations of Viking-Age magic

As noted above, the years since the appearance of the first edition have seen a huge flowering of published work on Norse sorcery and its place in Viking lives.

Among the most significant of these works, François-Xavier Dillmann's 2006 *magnum opus* on the sorcerers of ancient Iceland has been mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 above, in the context of research history and the social cartography of magical practitioners. Although the core of his work is the most comprehensive and source-critical review of the textual material ever undertaken, of course the book also has much to say about the interpretation of sorcery in the Viking Age.

Though based on his 1986 thesis, Dillmann's treatise was not published until four years after the first edition of this book, and in many ways it offers a parallel, though subtly different, view of the same sources. To the degree that one can do justice in synthesising an 800-page work of densely-argued and impeccable scholarship, his ideas have been woven into this new edition. Like Mitchell (2011: 210) before me, I here draw on Jochens' 2006 review to manageably summarise some of his conclusions:

> […] the magicians emerge as people who enjoyed the same rights and privileges as other Icelanders. With few exceptions they belonged to the class of free farmers; many were among the wealthiest and were often associated with political leaders through marriage. With the possible exception of *volur* (prophetesses), they did not constitute a special profession but survived like other Icelanders by engaging in animal husbandry and agriculture. Reinforcing their Icelandic identity is the observation that they were not newcomers to the country; their ethnic origins were not different from those of other Icelanders, and like them, they lived in settled households. Most were married and had children, but occasionally, widows and mistresses can be identified among the sorceresses. In short, the magicians constituted an intellectual, social, and economic elite within the Icelandic society.
>
> Jochens 2006: 490

I do not entirely agree with Dillmann's rather confident description of the nature of Icelandic sorcerers (as will be apparent from preceding chapters), but he makes some interesting points – not least in terms of elites, as we may here remember the wife of the Viking war commander who "gave her answers" on the altar at Clonmacnoise. Above all, I cannot see the same level of consistency and constancy in the sorcerers, as they seem to me to encompass a large variety of people and social circumstances.

Erudite and learned though it is, Dillmann's book also has its boundaries. Importantly, he sees the world of magic so vividly described in the sagas as being based on genuinely ancient traditions, a position that is at odds with much of contemporary literary scholarship. While I am broadly sympathetic to this (unsurprisingly in view of the preceding chapters), it is not without its drawbacks. As Mitchell has noted (2011: 7), "the book is necessarily limited by the fact that it largely allows the surviving medieval Icelandic sagas to define both the range of its enquiry and the nature of its evidence". As he makes clear, whatever their qualities and value, in the end these sources are products of the thirteenth century and later, and the creations (utilising uncertain, earlier source materials) of Christian minds. Of course, these are the source-critical problems discussed in chapter 2 above, and familiar to anyone attempting to use the later Old Norse texts to understand the Viking-Age world that they ostensibly describe.

This is a crucial point, because what Dillmann is omitting here is any category of evidence *that actually comes from the Viking Age* – most obviously in the form of archaeology. The geographic focus on Iceland is likewise purely a product of the literary source material, and does not reflect the wider spread of evidence, including other kinds of texts. This trend is also something of a characteristic of other works by textual scholars in the last decade or so, whether in the fields of philology, history of religions, or history.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2009, 2013: chs 2–3) has published eloquent studies of embodied female power in the Norse literature, which are models of textual analysis, but here again the emphasis is on the written sources alone. As Jóhanna writes:

The motif of women using magic proved extremely productive for saga authors. Its appearance in the Íslendingasögur primarily serves a narrative function; it was used for literary purposes rather than to record past pagan religious practices. Saga authors' ideas about magic were imprecise and probably depended on oral tradition.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 57

She does not entirely close the door on a Viking-Age reality, but without engaging with the contemporary evidence (with or without archaeologists' assistance) it is hard to see on what basis the depth of the medieval writers' understanding of ancient customs can be assessed.

Another important example is the book by Nicolas Meylan (2014; and his earlier work, 2011) which takes this approach much further, and opts for a radically different take on the textual sources relating to sorcery. In Meylan's reading, the saga narratives of magic in fact represent an Icelandic medieval recoding of ancient traditions and definitions (thus far broadly similar to Dillmann's ideas), but activated in their own present as a subversive discourse directed at the growing power of the Norwegian kings. The study encompasses an array of contemporary moral perspectives on magic, not least in the context of its literary patrons focusing their sorcerous power up or down the social scale. Meylan's book presents a series of closely argued textual case studies, ranging from *Gylfaginning* to *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, and *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, and on to saints' lives such as *Jóns saga Hólabyskups ens helga*, building his argument in careful and convincing increments to present magic as a discourse of power and invective.

Meylan's study is a considerable achievement, and maintains a constant pulse of internally consistent logic that is truly impressive. As I see it, however, his arguments stray into a slightly different sector of the same grey middle ground as Dillmann. Meylan is at least specific in his focus on the actual, medieval social context of the saga writers – their reasons for manifesting magic in the way they did, and for what purpose. However, besides alluding to vague substrata of earlier beliefs on which they supposedly drew for these political missives, he seemingly makes no

acknowledgement that this older world – the Viking Age that the sagas after all claim to be delineating – even existed in reality, with its own contemporary concerns and ritual practices. Critiquing the first edition of this present book, as well as other texts such as Raudvere's monographs (2001, 2003), he makes the interesting and accurate observation that for writers such as myself, "the actual practice of magic, whether in the pagan period or under Christianity, is taken for granted" (Meylan 2014: 5). He then contrasts this with the essentially hegemonic nature of the textual sources on which he believes such studies as my own are based, narratives firmly confined within literary arenas of political dominance that had nothing to do with the Viking period of centuries before.

Meylan is correct about the limitations of the written record that I have used in the preceding chapters, as others have done in similar studies; needless to say, I also hope that this is reflected in the appropriate source-critical caution of my arguments. What Meylan misses, however, like Dillmann before him, is the archaeological dimension of the Viking-Age material world. As we have seen, this not only provides extraordinarily close correlations to the later texts (the graves of staff-bearers, for example) but also a range of objects, places and milieu that go far beyond what later writers imagined – and all of it possessing a tangible materiality quite different to that of text.

At one point, Meylan spells out his position in plain language:

Besides documenting the response given by Icelanders to the challenge of dealing with kings when powerless, I have also sought to demonstrate that magic need not be studied as an actual, stable, and prediscursive phenomenon, defined by its agents, rites, and representations, but rather as a fundamentally discursive and protean category whose content could be adapted to fit with the wider political agenda of the text in which it was mobilized.

Meylan 2014: 198

This is Viking-Age magic *as medieval discourse alone*, a "protean category" generated within the pages of later, Christian books, and trapped forever therein. Readers will already have understood that what Meylan

suggests magic need *not* be, is precisely the subject of my own volume: the beliefs and practices (though far from stable) of people who really lived in the Viking Age, as opposed to the fictionalised actions of textual characters in the sagas' later mediation of a distant past. That said, this does not mean that Meylan is necessarily wrong about the motivations of the medieval authors who wrote of sorcery, simply that the prehistory to which they allude cannot be ignored. By the same token, every moment of the past was once the present, with its own urgently contemporary concerns of society and politics.

In theoretical contrast to this, there is the related field of magic – in the sense of genuinely-held, practical action, and social attitudes to it – in the Nordic Middle Ages proper. Closely linked to medieval beliefs in witchcraft, the 'empirical environment' of 'real' sorcery that permeated the saga-writers' world is also relevant to understanding the works they produced, naturally with implications for the view of the Viking Age thus engendered. Though outside the scope of even this second edition, we are fortunate in having two important books that engage with medieval magic in great detail (Segev 2001, discussed briefly above, and Mitchell 2011, now the standard work).

Segev's book sets the tone with its title, employing a refreshing specificity that overcomes the difficulties that we have seen in works such as Dillmann's and Meylan's: *Medieval magic and magicians – in Norway and elsewhere, based upon 12th–15th centuries manuscript and runic evidence.*

Mitchell's volume delves much deeper. His timeframe is 1100–1525, and Viking-Age sorcery forms only a brief but necessary background to his study of magic in the Middle Ages proper (the first edition of *The Viking Way* is a frequent point of reference). *Witchcraft and magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* is a superb work, essential for understanding the place of sorcery in the medieval mind, and in my opinion perhaps the best meditation that has so far appeared on the social role of northern witchcraft in the neglected space between the end of the Viking Age and the Renaissance (it is furthermore written with an elegance that is often absent from works of such deep scholarship). Mitchell writes perceptively of the

textual use of magic as, “a kind of metalanguage for communicating perceptions and important ideas about what it meant to be a pagan or a Christian” (2011: 25), as applied to the long process of conversion that began in the early Viking Age and was still not completed in the North until well into the medieval period. In particular he provides an outstanding analysis of the daily, domestic context of sorcery in the Middle Ages (*ibid*: ch. 2) that is very similar to aspects of its Viking-Age counterpart that I have attempted to bring out above; later in the work (*ibid*: ch. 6, see also Mitchell 2000), his studies of gendered magics also make a major contribution to these debates, and have been incorporated in the preceding chapters of this new edition.

Questioning Norse ‘shamanism’

A steady trickle of new works on shamanism in relation to Old Norse beliefs began to appear soon after the first edition was published (*e.g.* von Schnurbein 2003, focusing on the politics of its study rather than Viking-Age realities; Biering 2006 on its sociology). The publication of the first edition also led to invitations to describe Old Norse spirituality in the context of wider discussions of shamanic belief systems (Price 2010b, 2011, 2015b).

One work in particular has taken up these themes, and in culmination of long years of patient research Clive Tolley published his findings in a monumental two-volume work, *Shamanism in Norse myth and magic* (2009a). He is clear in his objectives, stated early: “to answer the question of whether Norse literature indicates that ancient Scandinavians had the notion of a practice which might reasonably be termed ‘shamanism’, whether as an actual phenomenon of ordinary life, or as a motif appearing in fictional settings” (2009a/1: xv). In the course of his work he also utilises folklore and ethnography relating to shamanic belief systems (unusually in northern studies, he is one of only a handful of scholars who also has a mastery of the Finnish material), and compares them with the Icelandic textual sources.

Over 21 chapters (with a usefully annotated contents list that is a model of its kind), supported by a volume of reference materials, Tolley first explores the definition and character of shamanic belief systems in general.

He then proceeds methodically through the Icelandic corpus, and argues systematically for a lack of real correlation with Norse practices as reflected in the texts. Thus the various Óðinnic 'initiation' rituals have nothing to do with shamanism (Tolley 2009a/1: ch. 16), the World Tree is an Indo-European and Germanic feature rather than a circumpolar one (*ibid*: ch. 13), what might appear to be helping spirits are something else (*ibid*: ch. 9), and so on; Gardeła has made a more effective summary than mine in his 2011 review, which is also from the perspective of an archaeologist. It feels unjust to represent Tolley's views so briefly, and the reader is very much directed to engage closely with his deeply impressive scholarship; the two volumes of his 2009 book together run to nearly 900 pages. However, the central drive of his work remains in the relentless decision (for that is what it is) to adopt positions against a shamanic interpretation, even when others equally plausible are available.

One extended example can serve to illustrate what I see as the problem, in the form of Tolley's reading of Þorbiorg lítilvolva's Greenlandic rituals in *Eiríks saga rauða*. In the course of a long study (Tolley 2009a/1: 487–95), her presence on the farm at Herjolfsnes, the reception she meets with, and the actions she takes, are all interpreted as a carefully deliberate satire on Christian episcopal ceremony, intended as a caustic comment on the supposedly recalcitrant heathenism of the Greenland colonists. This extends to every detail of the famous description, where in Tolley's view we find, "the high seat she is provided with, recalling a bishop's *cathedra*, and the staff she bears, adorned like a bishop's crozier, along with her cloak and hat, a sort of parody of the bishop's robes and mitre" (2009a/1: 491). This kind of filter is then extended further. In my comments above on Dillmann's view of the sorceresses as elites, I made a brief comparison with Ota/Auðr on the altar at Clonmacnoise; here Tolley also refers to this, but to him it is just another Christian denigration, depicting pagan sacrilege to show how uncouth the Scandinavians are. As Gardeła has also noted (2011: 240) all this is to ignore the abundant archaeological (and other) evidence for precisely these things, actually from the Viking Age – we need only think of the women buried with staffs and the accoutrements of ritual; the evidence

for unusual clothing; the platforms evident on cult sites; the miniature chairs; and so on. We will return to this point below.

Although he places greater credence than Tolley in the ultimate antiquity of the information encoded in the sagas, Dillmann also questions whether the rites described can properly be seen as shamanic. In the course of many meticulous dissections of saga episodes (Dillmann 2006: 238–308), again notably the rituals of Þorbiorg, Dillmann does not accept that the sorceresses entered trance, and as in his earlier publications (1993, 1994) he rejects the overall links between the practices of Norse magic and those of circumpolar belief systems.

Some years ago I discussed both these fine books in a career retrospective interview for *Brathair*, the Portuguese-language journal of Scandinavian studies in Brazil, in response to specific questions about how I saw Dillman's and Tolley's researches in the light of my own (Langer 2011). As I emphasised there, both their volumes are truly works for the ages – they deal comprehensively with primary data, which they catalogue and unpack with impeccable expertise, with an end product that is both exhaustive and authoritative. Both works will last far longer than mine, and their authors have done a service to anyone interested in the field.

However, both authors also claim explicitly to be assessing magic and sorcery, its practice and practitioners, *in the Viking Age*. What both of them are doing in practice, it seems to me, is exploring the vocabulary and description of magic/sorcery/shamanism *as they appear in the medieval discourse-world of the written sources* (in Tolley's case, supplemented by even later ethnographies and folklore). Of course, I have also used these categories of source material, but as a complement to others for a more holistic picture. The problem is thus exactly what we have seen with Meylan's work above, and like him, Tolley even takes pains to distance himself from the actual contemporary evidence. Early in his book, he states plainly that he finds archaeological material to be of little value in the absence of the written word, while also suggesting that the textual sources should be allowed "to speak for themselves as far as possible" (Tolley 2009a/1: 5, 12).

A reluctance to engage with material beyond one's expertise and competence is a professional virtue, and worthy of respect. However, this does not mean that data and evidence from beyond one's disciplinary comfort zone can simply be ignored as if it did not exist, and as though it could have no bearing on the conclusions drawn from a researcher's primary field. Textual scholars sometimes comment rather sharply on archaeologists' attempts to employ written sources without adequate advice from those trained in their analysis – but it seems to me a far greater problem to reconstruct a prehistoric world *solely* on the basis of things written down centuries later, while omitting the absolutely vast body of material that actually derives from the time and culture in question.

All this also raises the eternal question of definition, at times the bane of humanities research. To what degree can we really define Norse magic? Which terminologies should we use – those of the medieval textual sources; those of contemporary anthropology and history of religions; or those of a wider discourse into human cognition, spirituality and ritual practice? Or others entirely? In the preceding chapters my own position has hopefully become clear, employing the vocabulary and categories discernible in the texts, but activated in the context of later scholarly perspectives. At the time of writing the first edition, which comprised my doctoral studies, I met with a great deal of debate around exactly this issue, and was surprised to realise the degree of precision that some scholars believed was attainable in this matter. Years later, I was refreshed to read the views of another researcher – a Classicist – on the same problem in relation to the sorcerers of the Ancient World:

[authors should not] confuse the attempt to give final definition to an abstract concept, ancient or modern, which is self-evidently impossible, with the delineation of a coherent core of source material for study […]

Ogden 2008: 3

Ogden goes on to make rather more caustic remarks about his colleagues working on Classical magic, but raises the valuable point that, in the end, they are all grappling with the same material – in this case, documents with "very different textures" that nonetheless maintain an emphatic thematic

coherence, wrapped up in “a strong tradition with a tight nexus of repeated motifs” (*ibid*). This captures my approach completely, as much the same is true for Norse sorcery, with the critical addition of the growing range of archaeological sources, plus a variety of evidence of different kinds, contexts and dates from the wider Viking diaspora.

Staffs and spinning

At the core of the first edition’s explorations of Viking-Age sorcery as reflected in material culture are, of course, the staffs and the burials in which they have been found, taking up a large proportion of chapter 3. Perhaps the most tangible of impacts was that, after 2002, these objects began to be re-labelled in museum exhibitions, changing from the usual default identification as ‘roasting spits’ to the possible equipment of sorcerers. In the years since the original publication, these artefacts, together with their analogues and related paraphernalia, have also been included in many other scholarly publications as part of the regular corpus of Viking material culture.

Revising the catalogues

At the most basic level, for some time after publication I received correspondence from museum curators and archaeologists for whom my book triggered memories of unusual objects that had lain in their storerooms and archives, unreported and unpublished. Could *this* possibly be one of these staffs, they asked? In quite a few cases, the answer was yes, perhaps it is. All these re-interpreted finds have now been incorporated in the revised text of chapter 3 above.

In terms of the corpus of staffs, one scholar in particular, Leszek Gardeła, has made an enormous contribution through many years of research into the materiality of Norse magic, including following its tangled connections through the byways of mortuary behaviour and ritual practice. Partly inspired by the first edition of this book (as he kindly acknowledges, Gardeła 2016: 7), over nearly a decade he has built up an impressive catalogue of works devoted to the theme (*e.g.* Gardeła 2008a–d, 2009a & b) culminating in his doctoral thesis from 2012 and a major monograph on the

staffs in 2016 (with references to all his many Polish-language works on similar themes).

This latter publication is one of the most important to appear in this field, and like the handful of others of its kind, impossible to summarise in a manner that does it justice. Like me, he reviews the written sources mentioning these objects, and provides a detailed exploration of the funerary material, as well as the varying ways in which it has been interpreted. As both a complement to the present work, and a significant expansion of its themes, Gardeła's 2016 volume is highly recommended. He also includes a comprehensive catalogue of staffs (Gardeła 2016: 268–347), recording a great deal more morphometric information than my own. For the purposes of this second edition, I have not attempted to replicate his lists, but instead (where necessary) simply amended points of detail in the existing discussion in chapter 3; it should be noted, however, that there are also several areas in which our interpretations differ.

The key takeaway from Gardeła's work is his agreement that these objects *are* the equipment of Norse sorcerers, while not ruling out other, simultaneous meanings. However, he goes further in speculating about a much wider range of material culture (*i.e.* beyond the staffs, hallucinogens, 'amulets' and special clothing details that I considered) which he suggests may have been characteristic of sorcerers. I do not fully agree with his arguments, but of course he may be right; his ideas, developed throughout his book, will repay careful study by anyone interested in this field.

Although the focus of Gardeła's research on sorcery has lain on its tools, he especially explores the ways in which they are also metaphors and manifestations of *entanglement* (cf. Hodder 2012). This can be seen as an expression of the phenomenon discussed in chapter 3 above, wherein design elements of the staffs are also found across a wide array of other artefacts (keys, chains, whips, 'rattles', lamps, musical instruments, and the like), while at the same time embracing a multiplicity of symbolic meanings (the staff as phallus, as supernatural steed, as weapon, and so on). This resembles Howard Williams' (2016) notion of *mortuary citation*, an immensely useful concept for funerary research and of close relevance to the staffs.

Gardeła also raises the notion of *ambivalence*, a kind of intentional ambiguity of meaning to which we will return below. A particular line of his enquiry has been the notion of deviant burial, especially in relation to the possible graves of sorcerers. His emphasis here is on ritual trauma, such as the mutilation of bodies, or unusual treatment of the dead, such as prone burial or the use of large stones to cover the corpse. In several publications he has very much broadened my own discussions, to speculate about the mortuary handling of magic-users, and the social role(s) that this might imply for them in life (Gardeła 2008c, 2013a & b, 2017a). As part of this research, Gardeła goes rather further than me in terms of what he is prepared to tentatively identify as a staff – for example, the strange pointed object found in the undoubtedly 'special' double grave from Gerdrup near Roskilde (Christensen 1981; Kastholm 2016; Gardeła 2016: 82f) and a similar item from the nearby site of Trekroner-Grydehøj (Ulriksen 2011: 174–6; Gardeła 2012: 128f, 2016: 107f, 278f; Price 2014b).

Among the work arising from the first edition is the observation made by several scholars of an interesting image that I missed, the presence of a staff-bearing female on cross slab 123 from Kirk Michael on the Isle of Man (Wilson 2008: 83–5; Pentz *et al.* 2009: 226f; Bourns 2014: 25–7; Gardeła 2016: 197ff). A definitive identification is impossible, but in the context it would not be inappropriate to see her as one of the *volur* awakened to reveal details of the coming Ragnarok.

Staffs of measurement

Other approaches to the staffs and their function have also been revisited over the past decade or so. The earlier interpretation of the staffs as instruments of measurement, possibly in connection with textile-working, has been mentioned in chapter 3 above. This was subsequently revived by Ingrid Gustin (2004: 129–33) in her excellent study of Viking-Age trade and exchange, particularly in the context of the entangled nature of cubo-octahedral design elements. Several years later in the wake of Eldar Heide's work (see below), she expanded on this in detail to set the staffs in a very different context to my own interpretations, equally gendered and very plausible (Gustin 2010). Following their entangled similarities with other objects, as observed by Gardeła and others including myself, Gustin argues

for the staffs as clear symbols of female power in the broadest sense. To her, they are measuring rods for cloth, metaphors of textile manufacture, possibly with overtones of supernatural power through the spinning connotations of *seiðr* – all without actually being staffs of sorcery in any practical sense. In terms of the funerary context, it seems clear that the Birka chamber-graves are of high status, but Gustin queries whether *volur* and their kind really were socially elevated, being instead actually on the margins of society. For burials Bj. 660, 834 and 845, the presence of quartered Arab coins is seen as indication of mercantile activity, again reinforcing the image of the deceased as in some way connected to the commercial production of textiles in a manner that suits the differing interpretation of the staffs (Gustin 2010: 349, 351ff).

These are interesting and convincing arguments, and like my own, of course impossible to really prove one way or another. I completely agree about the overlapping symbolic meanings of these objects, the entanglement of female-gendered things that Gardeła draws from Hodder, but there are other factors that, for me, mitigate against Gustin's reading of these burials. First, there is no sense in which sorceresses everywhere enjoyed the same status or place in society – indeed, consistency is hardly a watchword of Viking-Age ritual praxis. Second, whatever we choose to call them, the objects are undoubtedly metal rods of some kind, and as such really do match the saga descriptions remarkably well: women of power associated with staffs. In their dress and objects (such as the necklace of amulets in Bj. 660), these women are clearly 'different' in some way. Third, in her 2010 paper, Gustin specifically addresses the same three Birka chamber-graves as I reviewed in chapter 3 of this book – to which we can now add a fourth in Bj. 760 following Gardeła's resolution of the confusion with Bj. 660. But the argument connecting sorcery, staffs and the graves of unusual women is far larger and more complex than a handful of burials at this one site, as both editions of the present work have suggested. I do not find Gustin's rejection of the staffs as tools of sorcery to be a convincing argument, but I think she is right that they were *also* freighted with many layers of associations to textiles and 'women's work' seen as an arena of transformative power and status. In the end, the difference between the two

is one of emphasis, and it is entirely possible that these objects were always intended to be markers of ambiguity. When a woman bearing a staff such as these was encountered, perhaps the effect was to push people off-balance, a disconcerting feeling of not knowing exactly who or what she was.

Spinning seiðr?

Another crucial set of works in the materiality of Norse magic has been produced by Eldar Heide (2002, 2006a–c), a Norwegian medievalist and specialist in folklore who has become a worthy champion of what he terms 'retrospective method' in the study of ancient religion – a field that now has its own peer-reviewed journal. Heide's doctoral studies on *galdr*, as we have seen one of the major components in the Old Norse toolkit of sorcery, complement my own on *seiðr*. I believe he has solved many of the fundamental questions that I raised in the first edition of this book, and considerably enhanced what we know of magic and its functions in the Viking Age. His thesis includes detailed studies of the terminology of *gandr* and *gondull* (Heide 2006c: 14–37), and well as an extensive study of 'riding' in Old Norse magic, especially in relation to the names of sorcerers (*ibid*: 109–234).

A particular breakthrough comes in Heide's speculations on the nature of the rituals themselves, and what it may suggest about their material correlates in the form of archaeological finds. Using a sophisticated application of etymological analysis (Heide 2006a, 2006c: 235–63), he suggests a new interpretation of the central motif in the rites of trance, namely the sending out of the performer's soul to act at a distance. Heide considers the possibility that the soul was thought to be attached to the body by means of a spiritual thread, maintaining a connection between the travelling essence of the person and its physical shell (see also Heide 2006b). The necessity of safeguarding this link – containing nothing less than the life and mind of the sorcerer – could explain the presence of the assistants in *seiðr* rituals, and also the threat posed by counter-magic such as Óðinn's tenth spell from *Hávamál* (155), that could sever 'riding' witches "from the home of their shapes / from the home of their minds". These ideas of course also accord well with the wider symbolism of spinning and

weaving in Norse thought, in connection with fate and war, the *nornir* and *valkyrjur*, as discussed in the preceding chapters.

Having explored this notion in principle through textual sources, Heide then turns to the postulated staffs themselves, on the basis of the examples set out in the first edition of my own book. It will be remembered that in chapter 3 above, one of the key elements in the typology and identification of staffs in the archaeological record was the presence of the expanded 'handle' construction, resembling a basket-like cage of iron rods joined at the top and bottom by discs or mounts. In the first edition, I speculated as to the degree to which this feature could be considered an actual handle – as it clearly is on the keys, for example – but there seemed to be no clear-cut answer. On some examples, such as that from Søreim, the construction was too big to be grasped in the hand, while on others, such as Klinta, the feature appeared in the middle of the shaft. Heide brilliantly solves this puzzle (2006c: 250–3) with reference to a number of wooden objects from early modern times that have a shape identical to that of the iron staffs: a wooden stock with an expanded 'cage' at one end (Figs 8.1, 8.2). The wooden examples are *distaffs*, more precisely termed caged distaffs, the basket-like arrangement being used to gather raw fibres by twisting them round the tines or rods, to be later spun into thread (for further discussion of distaffs in terms of technology, form and function, see Baines 1977). Heide's conclusion is compelling, and in my opinion conclusive: many of the iron staffs were *symbolic distaffs*, used in the rituals of magic to 'wind back' the travelling soul on its thread, returning it to the body of the performer.

In this context we can also note that literary connections between Norse magic and distaffs were observed by Dillmann as far back as 1982, in a work of which I was unaware when writing the first edition (while he in turn was unaware of the archaeological parallels).

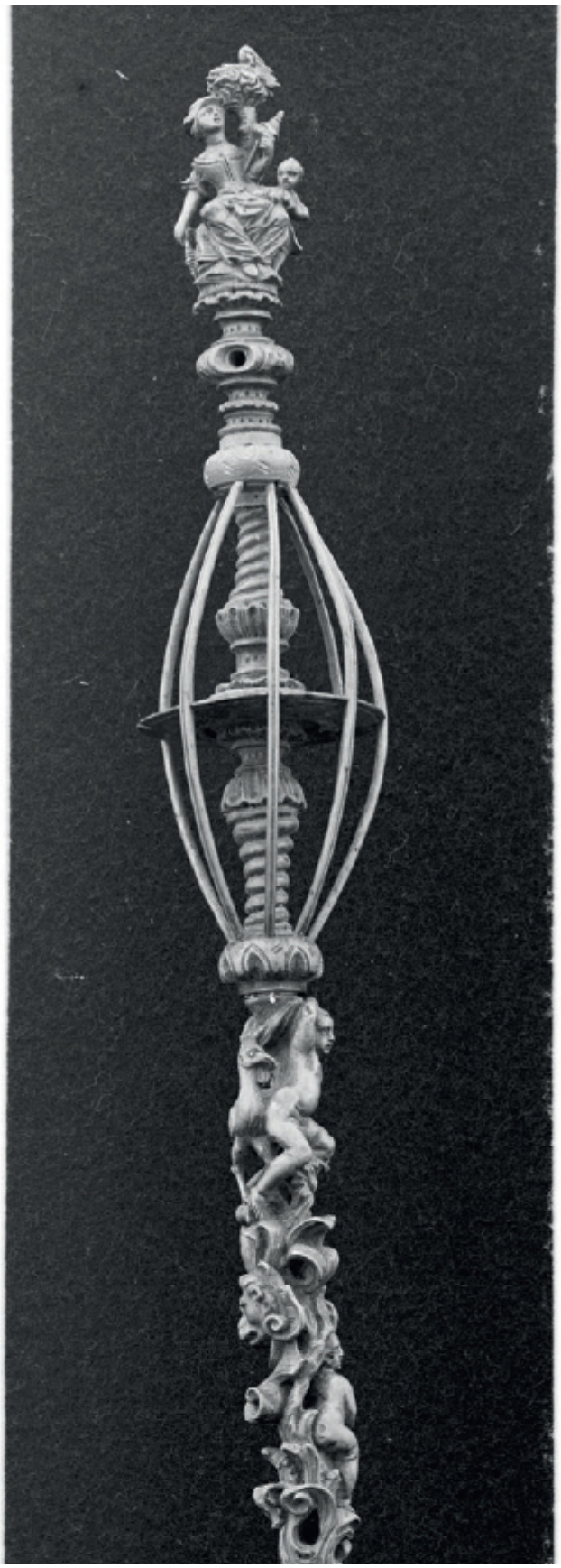






Fig. 8.1 A highly ornamented 18th-century Italian distaff of the caged type; the resemblance to the design of Viking-Age 'staffs of sorcery' is obvious (photo Metropolitan Museum of Art, Creative Commons).





Fig. 8.2 A hand distaff of the cage type, manufactured today for the handicraft industry. This form can be paralleled exactly among the Viking-Age staffs (photo by Stephenie Gaustad, Dragonfly Farms, used by kind permission).



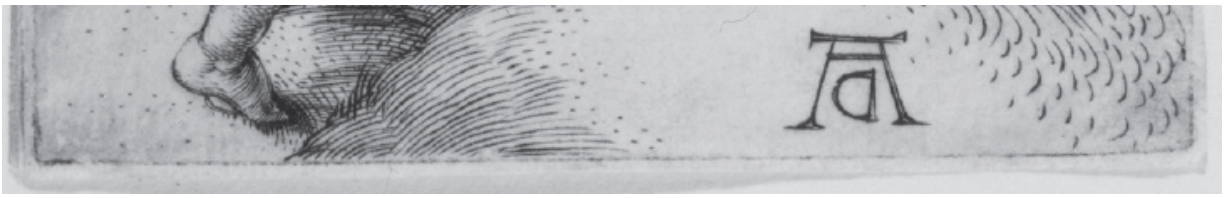


Fig. 8.3 The Witch*, an engraving made* c.*1500 by Albrecht Dürer, showing a naked witch riding backwards on a goat, a distaff held between her thighs. In the public domain.*

To develop this idea further, we can consider that distaffs were well-known, almost stereotypical, items of equipment in the toolkit of later medieval and early modern witches (my earlier pers. comm. to this effect is taken up by Gardeła, 2016: 183f). Artists even depicted witches with such tools, as in the engraving from 1537 for Boethius variously titled *The Spinner* or *Old Sorceress With Distaff*, attributed either to Hans Holbein the Younger or to Hans Weidlitz, and showing a woman using this instrument to raise a storm. An earlier image, engraved *c.*1500 by Albrecht Dürer depicts a naked woman riding backwards on a goat, a distaff held vertically between her thighs (British Museum 1868,0822.188; Fig. 8.3). Especially the latter image, with its nudity, the clear phallic connotations of the distaff held and moved between the legs, and even ridden upon, again finds a ready parallel in the sexual dimensions of *seiðr* and Viking-Age magic. A curious late parallel, to be taken very tentatively but surely of interest, can be found in the Swedish folklore traditions that describe the Belt in the constellation of Orion as ‘Freyja’s (or Frigg’s) Distaff’ (Schön 2004: 228).

Heide’s ideas on the staffs and spinning have met with widespread acceptance, combined with my own work on them as tools of sorcery. Among many examples, Cartwright (2015) has built this into his studies of textile production, while Pentz (2017) has taken them up in connection with his work on the so-called ‘valkyrie’ icons on metalwork.

At the same time as Heide was working on his distaff theories in connection with *seiðr* and *gandr*, another scholar also began to explore these objects in a more domestic setting. Working with close analyses of floor surfaces in Viking-Age dwellings, Karen Milek has interpreted clusters of tiny holes as marking the places where distaffs have been rested

vertically while in use – presumably by women in the context of the textile work that is thought to have been undertaken in such structures (Milek 2006: 224–7; 2012: 97, 100ff). Milek has further suggested that the iron staffs do not just *resemble* distaffs, but may actually have functioned as such (while not ruling out the kinds of ambiguous multiple meanings and uses that Gardeła and others have supported). In this context she also suggests that the rings, loops and perforations observed on some of the staffs could have been used to more closely bind threads to the shaft while working. Milek acknowledges that her theories would require unusually tall distaffs, of which none have so far been found, but her observations raise a range of new, intriguing possibilities for these ambiguous objects.

Queering magic?

Since 2002 when the first edition appeared, gender studies have happily expanded exponentially in Viking research. This is not the place for a thorough overview, but at the time of my original publication there was still a tendency towards a somewhat basic dichotomy of biological sex, usually determined on the basis of osteology or genotype. Furthermore, masculinity formed a largely unconscious and unremarked baseline assumption, that at best was supposedly 'balanced' by specific studies devoted to the lives of women (the situation was ably deconstructed by Arwill-Nordbladh 1998; see also Hauptmann 2014). All too often, a supposedly gendered Viking Age in fact exacerbated the androcentric focus by relegating the lives of women to some kind of intensively-studied but nonetheless discrete category distinct from society in general (the classic example being the exhibition display case on 'Viking women', treating them in a manner akin to, say, 'metalworking' or 'trade', rather than as half of humanity).

In Viking studies, the standard work at the time was Jesch's 1991 book, supplemented by a relatively small number of more socially-situated studies of women in Norway and Iceland, such as the publications of Dommasnes (1982, 1991), Kress (1993) and Clover (1993) – the latter a massively influential paper – as well as in the colonies (*e.g.* Stalsberg 1991, 2001). Womens' lives as reflected in pre-Christian imagery (*e.g.* Göransson 1999)

and late Viking-Age runestone inscriptions were also explored (*e.g.* Gräslund 1989, 1995, 2001b).

Jenny Jochens' work (*e.g.* 1995, 1996) has been referenced extensively above, with its interesting divide between image and reality in female lives. The various literary figures that she describes have been addressed in a number of more recent works and collections (*e.g.* Anderson & Swenson 2002; Simek & Heizmann 2002; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013; Coleman & Løkka 2014; Hauptmann 2014; Jesch 2015: ch. 4), and we also have Auður Magnúsdóttir's important work on concubinage and female sexual strategies (2001, 2008; cf. Raffield *et al.* 2018). Children have now made a late entry into integrated studies of Viking life (*e.g.* Callow 2006; Mejsholm 2009) and the last decade has seen vital studies of disability and definitions of the able-bodied (*e.g.* Bragg 2008; Arwill-Nordbladh 2012). This brief listing barely scratches the surface of the research undertaken, but one notable absence is the relative dearth of works on Viking-Age masculinity, deconstructed from a gender perspective rather than taken as read in hegemonic assumptions.

Perhaps the most radical rereading of sex and gender in the late Iron Age appears in the work of Ing-Marie Back Danielsson (*e.g.* 2002, 2007, and her ongoing publications). With a study focus on the gold foils of the Migration Period and later, she approaches them from a posthumanist perspective, looking at questions of agency, of the message the objects were designed to convey, and the processes of manipulation by which this was achieved. Most importantly, she critiques not only the simplistic gender constructions conventionally put forward for the period – especially for the foils (*e.g.* Back Danielsson 2007: 76–81) – but also the equally basic ways in which sex is made by archaeologists; her specific comments on burials will be explored more fully below. Going far beyond the gender categories of men and women, she sees instead arenas of bodies and beings, of mutable identities that could be activated according to circumstance and the media of expression: a vision that is original, bold and exciting. There is a real sense in which her image of the late Iron Age is almost an alternative world, predicated on quite different concepts to, for example, my own readings of magic (which she sees as reliant on a spurious advocacy of

‘scientific’ interpretation, that I myself cannot find in my own work; *ibid*: 95–8, 237ff). Her understanding of the late Iron Age is both compelling and erudite, but where we differ is that for me it seems to ultimately rest on a *decision* to see the past in this way, pursued along a path of speculative chain-thinking (cf. Wylie 1989). That said, I may be wrong, and she may not be; I would like to see my own work as more of an interpretive cable, made of mutually supporting but independent strands of evidence, but that of course is my own subjectivity speaking. Back Danielsson’s arguments are complex, detailed, highly critical of the first edition of this book – and well worth reading in full.

The engenderment of Viking life (and our research into it) is of course vital for the whole structure of late Iron Age studies, but it is of particular relevance to the present work for several reasons. As we have seen, sorcery and magic were *deeply* infused with gender codes, sexual connotations and perhaps physical acts, and with a symbolism and iconography that expressed these things in material form. In chapter 3 above we reviewed the early work on the gendering of magical practice, especially in relation to the concepts of *ergi* and *nið* (*e.g.* Anonymous 1902; Almqvist 1965; Meulengracht Sørensen 1980, 1983; Grambo 1989; Jochens 1993; and many others); aspects of these components were also discussed in the context of circumpolar beliefs, in chapter 5.

Following the publication of the first edition, others also addressed the sexual dimensions of magic, including Dillmann (2006: ch. 16) and Heide (2006c: 33–7, 264–99), the latter in the context of phallic aggression and penis symbolism in the various forms of staff. Dillmann also addresses *ergi* (2006: 439–56), arguing that it was not inherent to *seiðr* but rather an autonomous phenomenon that the latter sometimes activated. I would not disagree with this, though I would see it as rather more affirmative a part of magic as practiced by men. Dillmann also emphasises its connotations of effeminacy rather than perceptions of sexual perversion; again, I am not sure I agree, given the violent homophobia of Viking-Age norms. Other scholars incorporated my ideas on magic into wider studies of gender in the later Iron Age (*e.g.* Moen 2011: 40–5; Eriksen 2015: ch. VII-VIII – this

work also links to Andrén's earlier studies of door symbolism, but extends them much further).

Chapters 4 and 5 above raised the possibilities that shamans – for want of a more culturally specific term – can in many contexts viably be seen as a gender (or perhaps more than one) in their own right, beyond the putative norms of biological sex. In many ways this entire book has concerned the 'differentness' of magical performers in the Viking Age, and nowhere is their sex and gendered identity in greater focus than in their probable burials. Gender has long been identified as a problematic aspect of funerary archaeology as traditionally interpreted. Many scholars have wrestled with the need to reanalyse burials, and also with the consequences of doing so (*e.g.* Arnold 1991; Dowson 2006; Geller 2009; Ghisleni *et al.* 2016; Back Danielsson 2016); the issues that we face with this in the arguable 'sorcerer graves' of the Viking Age are far from new.

Too often concepts have been collapsed, the crucial distinctions between sex and gender are blurred, and indeed the very definitions of the terms themselves are also contested. Back Danielsson's work has been mentioned above, but her starting point lies in an exceptionally eloquent rejection (2007: 49–90) of persistent convention in the gendering of burials – especially through artefacts, whereby oval brooches supposedly denote a woman, weapons a man, and so on. She also questions assumptions of sex and gender in the analysis of images (she puts forward a vocabulary of masking), and in the social roles of late Iron Age people in general. In short, she is right – though, as above, I disagree with the somatic conclusions she goes on to draw from this. Not least, it must be clearly stated that we are only beginning to discern the overarching patterns of normative, and deviant, mortuary practices in the Viking Age at all – let alone in relation to the burials of sorcerers (*e.g.* Wicker 1998, 2012; Svanberg 2003b; Gansum 2004; Andersson 2005; Callmer 2006; Price 2008a & c, 2010a, 2014b; Wessman 2010; Gardeła 2013a & b, 2017a; the literature on the Viking-Age funerary record is vast and covers tens of thousands of excavated graves).

On re-reading chapters 3 and 4 above in the course of revisions of this new edition, it was an education to see the level of assumptions present in terms of both sex and gender. For the majority of the possible graves of

sorcerers, there are either no skeletal remains preserved (though it is clear that a body was present) or else no osteological sex determinations have been made; there is virtually no genomic data at all. The reading of these dead people as female-bodied, and gendered as women, is mine (and, to be fair, that of everyone else who looked at them previously). Although I have tried to amend some of the more glaring bias in vocabulary and terminology, some of this still remains in the text above, as to do otherwise would entail writing essentially a different book – but the issue must still be addressed.

Can we be sure that the people in the majority of the 'staff graves' examined in chapter 3 were gendered women? No, we cannot. They may have taken on a man's social role, while retaining a woman's identity (cf. Clover 1993). As Solli has persuasively shown (1998, 1999a & b, 2002, 2008), queer theory also provides a potentially fruitful means of engaging with these individuals. Their sense of self may have been, in our terms, non-binary or gender-fluid; identity may also have been something to negotiate, to choose and re-choose every day (*e.g.* Reeder 2008; Geller 2017). A transgender reading is also possible, and in a sense consistent with some of the shamanic patterns observed in chapter 5, though we should remember that – like much of our terminology – this is a politicised, intellectual, and Western term of the last century, and as such problematic (some would say impossible) to apply to people of the more remote past. All this is also inevitably speculative, considering the limitations of the material. There are many other possibilities and I do not discount any of them.

Beyond the social impact of the *ergi* complex, an aspect of sorcery relatively under-studied in the preceding chapters is the material world of its male practitioners (an interesting exception being Tulinius' 2008 collection; see also Gardeła's work referenced above). The problem of bias and assumption in the interpretation of Viking-Age burials has recently come under the spotlight with the case of chamber grave Bj. 581 on Birka, assumed ever since its excavation in 1878 to be the interment of a high-status warrior male. The new genomic study that chromosomally determined the sex of the dead person as female has already been mentioned above in chapter 6 (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017). The online

furore that greeted this publication has been addressed in a subsequent paper (Price *et al.* 2019), but served as a stark reminder of how charged these debates can be, and what is really at stake.

With Bj. 581 in mind, coupled with the ambiguous clothing signals on new finds such as the seated figure from Lejre, I looked again at Þórhallur Þráinsson's reconstructions of the Birka 'sorceress' graves Bj. 660, 845 and their kind, and began to wonder if I might in fact be looking at the 'missing' *male* sorcerers. It is an intriguing thought.

Concerning the saga descriptions of male sorcerers, often described pejoratively and coming to a bad end, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (2001) has proposed an interesting alternative reading, in a paper that was published almost simultaneously with the first edition of this book. In Jón's view, given the medieval religious context of the saga texts themselves, it is possible that the sorcerers were actually Christians persecuted for their spiritual difference. He argues that the sagas may have remembered them as pagans due to the outcome of later, contextualised legal or political disputes, which would have suited ascribing 'bad character' to the people of particular places or lineages. (As an aside, Jón also suggests that this may explain why Guðríðr, the only person to know the *varðlokkur* chants for the rituals in *Eiríks saga rauða*, was described as a Christian.)

The male users of magic also appear in the context of the gold foils mentioned above, whose iconography has been one of the prime sources for supposedly diagnostic sex and gender markers in late Iron Age art (*e.g.* Watt 2002; Simek 2002; papers in Adamsen *et al.* 2009; though remembering Back Danielsson's scepticism noted above). As Lotte Hedeager has observed (2015: 136f), a staff is actually the most common material attribute of the supposedly male figures on gold foils. If we accept this sex determination, then the conclusion is supported by Ulla Mannering's review of dress-based sexing and "paraphernalia" on 309 foils, mostly from Sorte Muld on Bornholm, of which fully 107 include a staff (Mannering 2006: 50–60, Tables 4.7– 4.12; see also Mannering 2017: ch. 2). As a counterpart to the obvious etymology of the female staff-bearing *volur*, Hedeager wonders (2015: 137) if the male staff-bearers are referencing the phallic connotations of the objects as discussed above, which in turn might have

contributed to the negative associations of *ergi* for male sorcerers. The complex language of gestures seen on the foils is hard to interpret, but clearly had precise meanings (*e.g.* Ratke & Simek 2006).

I predict that in coming decades, the study of sex and gender in the late Iron Age, in all their variation, will develop into perhaps *the* key area of Viking research.

The social world of war

Archaeological studies of warfare have also expanded dramatically since 2002, with a strong flavour of anthropological theory, not least in the shift of emphasis from the material culture of combat to the social dimensions of conflict (T. Williams 2016: 42ff summarises the new work in this field). This is particularly relevant for the tensions between 'materialist' and 'ritualist' schools of thought on the nature of war, again with a strong emphasis on the sociology of fighting in the context of militaristic ideologies (*ibid*: 46–53). Following on from classics such as Haas' *Anthropology of War* (1990), new archaeological studies include collections on prehistoric conflict by Arkush & Allen (2006) and Otto *et al.* (2006), though with surprisingly little content on the early medieval period. In the vein of Keegan's work, new meditations on the experiential aspects of combat can be found in Hedges (2002) and, in archaeology, by Carman & Carman (2006); all of this work is relevant for the discussions above in chapter 6.

In Viking studies, a new popular synthesis has appeared (Hjardar & Vike 2011), which though it must still be treated with care (especially regarding the written sources) nonetheless proves a useful resource. Over the last decade, however, there has been little academic work on specifically late Iron Age warfare, beyond focussed and site-based studies (such as the work on Birka's martial environment, including its ideology, *e.g.* Olausson 2001; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006, 2015b; Holmquist Olausson & Olausson 2009).

Following my earlier discussion of the ritual war as a feature of Viking-Age Scandinavian mind-set, Tom Williams has made great inroads in exploring something similar in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Williams 2016: 58– 60 and references therein, especially the lists of sources on pp. 120–3).

This clearly included the provision of magical assistance on the battlefield through supernatural agency (*ibid*: 195f). He sees the role of militant sorcery, the 'magical-religious sphere', as "a repository of power and legitimising ideology and as a locus of communal myth and cosmological orientation" (*ibid*: 60), and I think he is right.

This finds support from some unexpected sources, showing that even the most familiar texts can still yield new information when seen in a fresh light. Since the first edition appeared, a remarkable passage in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has been drawn to my attention by Michael Wood, which seems to suggest that a Viking army operating in early tenth-century England may have included a male ritual specialist in its ranks. Worth quoting in full for context, the Worcester Chronicle (D) includes the following entry for 910, to which the Abingdon Chronicle (B & C) adds the parenthesised names at the end:

Her bræc se here þone friþ on Norðhymbrum 7 forsawan ælc riht þe Eadweard cing 7 his witan him budan, 7 hergodan ofer Myrcna land, 7 ce cing hæfde gegadrod sum hund scipa, 7 wæs þa on Cent, 7 þa scipu foran be suþan east ondlang sæ togeanes him. Ða wende se here þæt his fultumes se mæsta dæl on ðam scipum, 7 þæt hie mihtan faran unbefohtone þær þær hie woldan. Þa geahsode se cing þæt þæt hie on heregað foron, þa sende he his fyrde ægþer ge of Westsexum ge of Myrcum, 7 hie offoran þone here hindan, þa he hamweard wæs, 7 him wiþ gefuhton 7 þone here geflymdon 7 his feala þusenda ofslogan. 7 þær wæa Eowils cing ofslegen 7 Healfden cing 7 Ohter eorl 7 Scurfa eorl 7 Oþulf hold [7 Benesing hold 7 Anlaf se swearta 7 Þurferð hold 7 Osferð Hlytte 7 Guðferð hold 7 Agmund hold 7 Guðferð].

Ed. Taylor 1983

911 [910]. Here the raiding-army in Northumbria broke the peace, and scorned every privilege which King Edward and his councillors offered them, and raided across the land of Mercia. And the king had gathered some hundred ships, and was then in Kent; and the ships went east along the south coast towards him. Then the raiding-army imagined that the most part of the reinforcement was on these ships, and that they might go unfought

wherever they wanted. Then when the king learned that they had gone on a raid, he sent his army both from Wessex and from Mercia, and they got in front of the raiding-army from behind when it was on its way home, and then fought with them and put the raiding-army to flight, and killed many of it. And there was killed King Eowils and King Halfdan, and Jarl Ohtor and Jarl Scurfa, and Hold Athulf [and Hold Benesing, and Olaf the Black, and Hold Thunferth, and Osferth Hlytte, and Hold Guthferth, and Hold Agmund, and Guthferth].

Tr. Swanton 1998: 97

The key person here is *Osferð hlytte*, whose name can perhaps be translated 'the seer' (OE *hlyta*, a diviner; related to the ON divinity name Lýtir, 'he who gets the offerings'). It appears as an Old English name in a casualty list largely comprised of Danish and Norwegian names, but this is not unusual in context. We can know no more about this man, but it is intriguing to speculate whether this is a brief record of something equivalent to the 'regimental chaplain' (in Michael Wood's phrase), similar to the wartime offices postulated above for people like the woman in Grave 4 at Fyrkat.

The Viking mind: a conclusion

The study of the Viking Age is a curiously personal thing. It reflects the (un)conscious biases of the student and also the prevailing sensibilities of the times, and there is always a risk that the past will be subtly moulded to fit the changing preoccupations of scholarly fashion. The same can be said of the many public faces of the period, reimagined or re-enacted according to taste. Today the Vikings are as popular as they have ever been, perhaps even more so in terms of the growing audience for both accessible recreations and academic mediations of their vanished world.

In 2002, the first sentence of this work proclaimed that it mattered to me what a person was in the Viking Age. Writing this new, concluding chapter sixteen years later, I have not changed my mind.

If one were to try to sum up in a sound-bite the long theoretical convulsions of archaeology during the 1980s and 90s, the years of postprocessualism that were reviewed in chapter 1 above, it might be to say

that never again have we been able to maintain the illusion of objectivity in our interactions with the past. We are in no way neutral observers, omnipotent sorters (or generators) of data that somehow gives of itself. More than a decade ago I found my own views on this unexpectedly reflected in an obituary for the Classical historian Keith Hopkins, with a useful summary of what I see as our condition:

History is a conversation with the dead. We have several advantages over our informants. We think we know what happened subsequently; we can take a longer view; we can do all the talking; and with all our prejudices, we are alive. We should not throw away these advantages by pretending to be just collators or interpreters of our sources. We can do more than that. Although, almost inevitably, whatever our ambitions, we finish up by foisting simplifying fictions on the complexities of the past which is largely lost.

Kelly 2004

For Hopkins, in ground-breaking works such as *A World Full of Gods* (1999), any order that might be discerned in the patterns of prehistory could only be arrived at through a process of negotiation with multi-vocal strands of evidence, obtained from wherever it could be found. This is also the principle on which I tried to follow the tangled path of *The Viking Way*.

One of the early reviews of the first edition, quoted above, argued that a better title might have been ‘The Viking Mind’ (Carver 2004: 163). I can see why. A core argument in both editions is that we should try to understand, and learn from, these ancient Northerners for who and what they were: people like us, radically different in their outlooks perhaps, but still trying to be themselves in all their marvellous variety, for better or worse. Part of this, uncomfortably for us today, involves a clear-eyed acknowledgement of the unusually prominent role that ritualised violence apparently played in their society, something that their contemporaries clearly recognised and recoiled from. Theirs was a violent culture in a violent age, certainly, but still there was something deeper in the lengths to which they went.

The role of ‘religion’ (or ‘custom’, or whatever we settle on calling it), was central – but as we have seen, in ways fundamentally different to the operations of the world faiths with which we are more familiar. One might note that no Viking ever launched a Crusade for the pre-Christian beliefs of the North, and in general it seems unlikely that their spiritual world included much notion of moral imperative at all (cf. Raffield *et al.* 2017). The ‘classic’ raiders of the Viking Age were possessed of an extraordinarily vital material culture, building on an intricate and sophisticated mental world that resonates with us still today. It must also be stressed that this landscape of the mind encompassed not just literal Vikings but everyone in the society around them. However, we should never forget that in a different light these same people were ruthless, single-minded and horribly effective murderers, and that the social structures we have studied above also served to support and promote their elevated view of themselves. I would suggest that this view too was shared, albeit competitively, across all members of society irrespective of sex or gender, blending a utilitarian view of ‘religion’ with the self-interested pursuit of power. When Vikings raided and pillaged (yes, the old stereotypes, but real and brutal enough) they did so because they wanted what other people had, and they did not feel any need to invent loftier motives to salve their consciences.

I choose this example not only to get to grips with cliché, but also to raise an aspect of Viking behaviour that no reasonable person could possibly find sympathetic.



Fig. 8.4. Birka meditations: the Viking dead watch their living descendants in Björkö village. A pencil sketch by Gunnar Hallström entitled Julnatt, 'Yule night', drawn c.1915–1920 (after Hallström 1997: 103) This is important, here at the last, because I always find it puzzling how anyone could possibly find the Vikings 'heroic'. The same thought seems to have occurred to one of *The Viking Way*'s reviewers who noted that "anyone reading Price's book will never again be able to romanticise the Vikings and their time … here the terror and madness of the Viking-Age Odin cult and its war-fixation emerge unvarnished" (Steinsland 2004: 143; my translation from Norwegian). In this vein, we need only look again at Ibn Fadlan and consider what one really thinks of the lethal slavers and rapists he met, with their blood-drenched rituals on the Volga; and these seem to have been only merchants, not primarily a fighting group at all. Vikings of this kind were sometimes heroes in their own minds, and perhaps occasionally in the eyes of people they tried hard to impress – but not in mine.

At the same time, we should not forget that beyond this violence, distributed all across their far-flung diaspora, was also a whole world of other Viking lives. Some feel familiar, others disconcertingly alien; many of them (in my mediation, of course) are actors in the book you have just read. We should pay these Viking-Age people the compliment of permitting them to live forever in their own vibrant present, rather than merely in our distant past. They are all still there, waiting for us.

Here’s to them.

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Note on bibliographic conventions

Publishers' names have necessarily been omitted for certain works published before c. 1910, when such information was not always printed. The titles of some post-medieval primary sources have also been abbrieviated where necessary, in cases where they run to paragraph length.

Translations of primary sources are listed immediately following the citation of the original text, even if the translated title differs from the original (e.g. *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki*). Skaldic poetry is listed by author, with datings according to Finnur Jónsson's edition.

Names of Icelandic authors are listed in full, indexed by forename rather than the patronymic. Scandinavian alphabetical order has been followed, with å, ä and ö listed after z. For listings of Old Norse and Old English sources, á, í, ó, etc follow their unaccented equivalents; ð follows d; y is followed by ý, þ, æ and ø.

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